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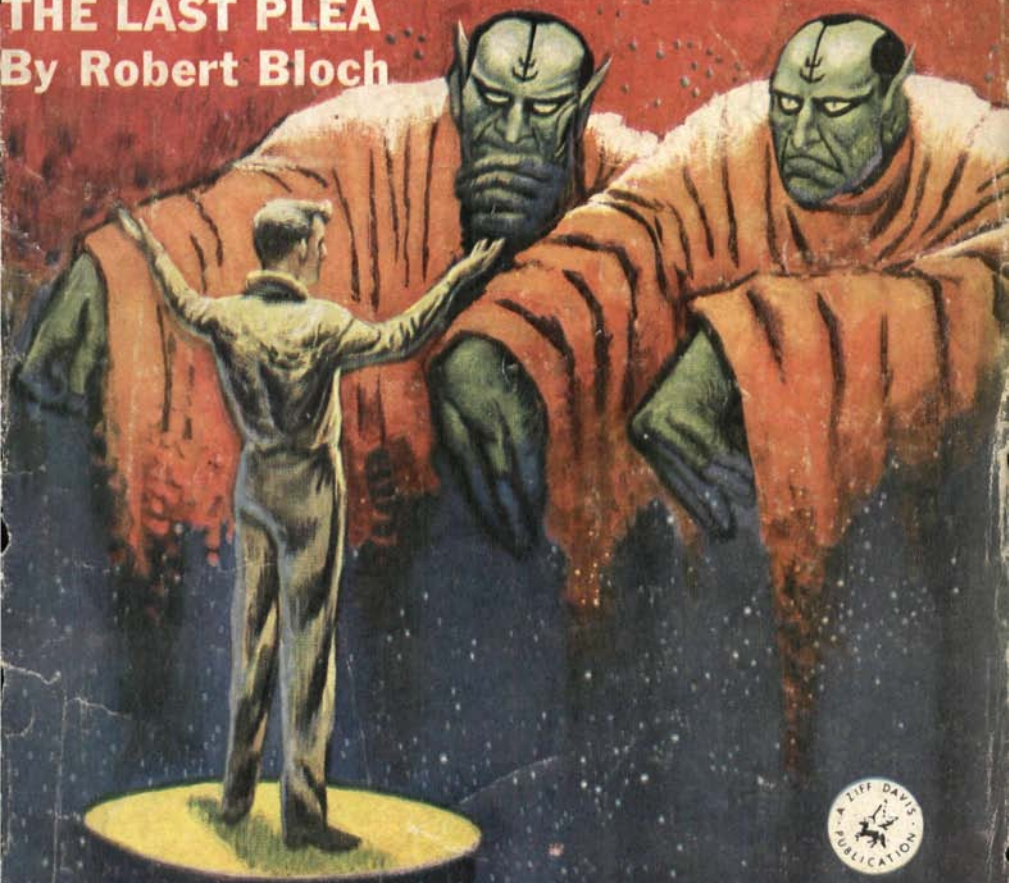
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JULY

THE LAST PLEA

By Robert Bloch



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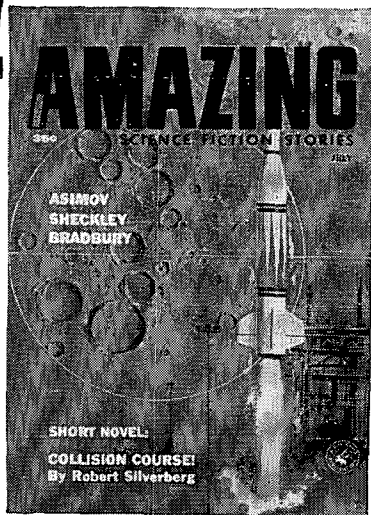
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fantastic

JULY

1959

Volume 8

Number 7

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Publisher

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Editorial Director

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Editor

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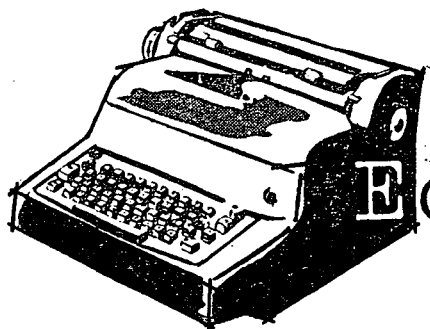
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Editorial

WHEN you are the editor of a magazine of fantasy, things sometimes get very tough indeed. Some of the folk who consider themselves hard-headed realists (well, they're hard-headed, anyway) will, upon learning of one's profession, sneer learnedly and inquire whether you have seen any good pixies lately.

Lately, however, I have been much cheered. Two recent news items have given me ammunition to confound the skeptics.

At a recent symposium on the deep sea, Dr. Roger Revelle, director of the famed Scripps Institution of Oceanography, proposed that legendary sea monsters may actually exist in the abysses. His evidence: the existence of gigantic eel larvae whose adult form has never been seen. Normal eel larvae are about three inches long, and grow into adult eels of about three or four feet. The giant eel larvae, however, often reach five feet in length. Projecting this on the same scale as normal eels, you would get eel from forty to fifty feet in length. In short—sea-serpent-size.

Another recent item encouraging to us dreamers was the report of a beautiful girl who developed acromegaly—a disfiguring and distorting permanent enlargement of the face and head. Crazy by her ugliness, the girl went on a rampage and killed several people. Mused the writer: could an event such as this be the origin of the Medusa myth—in which the sight of an ugly woman kills?

Well, anyway, it's something to toss at the hard-heads.—NL

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THE LAST PLEA

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Do you despise rock 'n' roll? Do you think Elvis is a hound dog? Do you understand the words of any popular song? Here, for the first time, the whole ghastly plot is revealed, the Conspiracy of Cacophony traced to its Cosmic Lair.

THERE was nothing supernatural about the way Clay Clinton got his start.

That part comes later.

In the beginning, there was only Luther Snodgrass, of Crump Creek, Texas.

Nobody paid much attention to Luther Snodgrass at first, including his own mother. She took one look at the squalling brat when he was born, then dumped him in the railway ditch next to the water-tower. Within five hours she took the next freight out of town and vanished into Oblivion (Okla.).

All she bequeathed the infant was his name, scribbled with the stub end of a pencil on the inside of a Sterno label. She christened him with a note pinned to half a pair of panties which she ripped

down the middle and wound around his spindle-shanks as he lay cradled in an old orange-crate.

Her message was brief and to the point, if any.

*To Whoom It may Consarn:
Pleese somebody take care
of my babey boy his name
is Luther Snodgrass after
his father the no good
sunabich he run out on me
in Waco.*

*Hoping You Are The Same,
—Joyleen Crutt*

A gandy-dancer named Hank Peavey found Luther—and his letter of introduction to a waiting world—within a matter of minutes after the freight pulled out. He called the sheriff and the sheriff took the baby to the County

Hospital, and the County Hospital (after a few desultory efforts to locate either Joyleen Crutt or the no good sunabich she had honored with the paternity of her offspring) passed the infant on to the County Orphanage at Crump Creek.

Luther Snodgrass did a lot of howling when he was a baby, but nobody can lay credit to discovering him then.

In due time he grew up to attend grammar school, where he pledged allegiance to the American flag, broke three windows, learned how to read (*Goofball Comics*) and write (*"Old Lady Krantz Has Dirty Pants"*) and do elementary sums (*"Cigarettes—28¢. Muscatel—59¢ a fifth"*).

At the age of sixteen he completed his formal education and his informal education simultaneously — the latter through the kind offices of a young lady named Luletta Switzel. Unfortunately for Luther Snodgrass, Miss Switzel was her father's pride and joy; rivalled in his affections only by the 12-gauge shotgun that he subsequently pointed in Luther's direction.

Luther got out of range in a manner apparently traditional to his family; he hopped the next rattler.

What he did in El Paso we'll probably never know. What he did in Fort Worth was thirty days for vagrancy.

During the next two years it almost seemed as if the young man were destined to become a writer. At least, he underwent what is apparently the customary apprenticeship for that career—he was a dishwasher in a restaurant, a house-to-house salesman, a fry-cook, and a merchant seaman. Actually, however, he flunked out on this last requirement. Luther Snodgrass never really went to sea; he merely did some work as an itinerant stevedore on the banana boats moored at the docks in New Orleans.

It was there, presumably, that he picked up his talent for the guitar (along with something else which he was fortunately able to get rid of after a few visits to the Public Health Clinic). But the musical affliction persisted; probably some of the local roustabouts encouraged him. He even managed to obtain possession of his own instrument — fortunately, nobody asked to examine the dice during the game—and before long he was playing and passing the hat in the French Quarter. The Vieux Carré



"What's Elvis got that Ah ain't got?" Luther asked.

Association takes a dim view of such activities on Bourbon Street, but he managed to get into a few dives on Decatur and Chartres. He developed a popular repertoire, including such authentic folk-classics as *The Harlot of Jerusalem*, *Christopher Columbo*, and that plaintive ballad, *The Ring-Dang-Doo*.

The few connoisseurs of folk music who heard him agreed unanimously that Josh White in his prime had never sounded anything like that. Luther Snodgrass was already beginning to develop his distinctive wriggling style; he learned that it was better to writhe and keep moving so as to avoid any missiles aimed his way by listeners who *didn't* appreciate his talent.

It was during this period that Opportunity knocked on young Luther's door. That chance of a life-time appeared.

To be exact, it wasn't really *his* door, but that of Miss Evangeline LaTour, who resided in the Quarter as a young art student (the art being pickpocketing and the old badger-game). And it wasn't really Opportunity knocking, but a gentleman named Jefferson Davis Fink, renowned throughout the sunny South-

land as the progenitor, proprietor and sole purveyor of *Finkola*.

Who has not heard of *Finkola*—that antidote for asthma, banisher of bunions, cure for catarrh, destroyer of dandruff, eradicator of eczema; indeed, of all the alphabetically-arranged ailments the flesh is heir to, including such obscure sub-Masonian-and-Dixonian-Line afflictions as the running trots, the galloping consumption and the creeping miseries?

If there are any amongst you who remain in ignorance of this amazing new scientific discovery, it is not because of any failing on the part of Jefferson Davis Fink. He has spared neither pain nor expense in his effort to spread the glad tidings of *Finkola's* miraculous healing properties throughout the length and breadth of Dixie. Wherever five watts join together in the conspiracy known as a southern radio station, the *Finkola* jingles jangle forth. Wherever a tall pine or a majestic cypress looms along the highway, a *Finkola* billboard obscures it. Wherever the sweet scent of magnolias mingles upon the soft and balmy breeze, it mingles with the joyfully-drawn breath of a

Finkola user (37% alcohol, by volume).

"Yeass, honey-chile," said Jefferson Davis Fink to Miss Evangeline LaTour, as he skilfully diverted her caressing fingertips from the neighborhood of his watch-chain, "Ah reckon they ain't hardly nobody nohow who don't guzzle the stuff."

"My aunt Minnie, she used it for a poultice, time she had them boils," Miss LaTour volunteered, eyeing her companions gen-oo-ine 5-carat (slightly yellowish) diamond ring.

"Sure, sugah," Mr. Fink agreed. "It cures 'most anything, up to *and* including mastitis. And I hear tell it makes a mighty refreshin' douche, too. *Mighty* refreshin'." Then, "Great bolls o' cotton, what's *that*?"

That proved to be Luther Snodgrass, returning unexpectedly early from his nightly rounds and roundelays. The sight of the tall, gangling youth who confronted them menacingly, armed with a guitar, served to both annoy and affright Miss LaTour.

"Gah dam'," she exclaimed, with girlish petulance. "Ah *tole* you to knock, afore you come bargain' in heah that-away."

THE LAST PLEA

"Who is this?" inquired Jefferson Davis Fink, sitting up and reaching for his vest.

"Mah *nevvoo*," Miss LaTour explained. "He's like mah *proto jay*."

"*Proto jay*? What-all is he a *proto jay* of?"

"Well, he plays *git-tar*. Ah been soht of boa'din' him heah whilst he studies up on it."

Noting the look of skepticism on Mr. Fink's face, she turned to Luther and wagged a coy cuticle. "You-all play suthin' foe Mistah Fink, hear?"

Luther heard. And Mr. Fink, whether he was thus inclined or not, heard also.

"Purty?" Miss LaTour inquired.

The least that gallantry demanded was a nod. Mr. Fink gave it, and thus precipitated another selection. Luther was all set to launch into a third, when Mr. Fink held up his hand.

The sight of the diamond silenced the young man.

"You right talented, boy," he declared. "Right talented. Evah think of goin' into the show bizness?"

"Show bizness?" Luther's eyes rivalled the diamond. "Ah been aimin' fer it."

Jefferson Davis Fink, cleared his throat, or at least a

portion thereof which was not occupied by plug tobacco. "Well, reckon you done hit the mark, son. So happens Ah'm readyin' anothuh extravaganza. Yessiree, anothuh big *Finkola* Fun Festival is 'bout ready to hit the road."

"Do tell!" Luther's reply was academic; actually it was scarcely necessary to tell him anything about the famous *Finkola* productions. Every year a truckload of top talent tramped through the turpentine swamps and bayous, and into the big tent swarmed every man, woman and woodcolt who possessed the *Finkola* label which entitled the bearer to admission. It was all part of Mr. Fink's advertising campaign, and he spared no expense in mounting his entertainments; raiding every cultural Mecca from Grossinger's to Las Vegas in his quest for top talent. And now—

"Boy, Ah'm gonna give you a chance. Yesiree, that's exactly what Ah'm gonna do! You're gonna work for me!"

"You mean, play mah guitar in the show? How about that?"

"Wonderful!" Evangeline LaTour beamed fondly on Luther and still more fondly on Jefferson Davis Fink. "Ah

do appreciate this. Truly Ah do."

"Think nothin' of it. Always ready to encuh-ge talent when Ah see it." Mr. Fink patted Miss LaTour on the thigh in a fatherly fashion and turned to Luther Snodgrass. "Repoht to mah office at the factory tomorrow mohn'in'."

"Yes, suh!"

"Meanwhile, kindly git to hell out'n heah."

"Yes, suh!"

Thus, as every biographer knows, Luther Snodgrass made his professional debut for *Finkola* the following week, in the thriving metropolis of Ague, Louisiana.

What every biographer doesn't know—or carefully neglects to mention—is that the young musician laid a bomb.

A liberal swig of *Finkola* has a tendency to deaden the hearing (indeed, there are some authorities who claim that steady indulgence will eventually deaden the indulger to a point where his only further use for *Finkola* will be as embalming-fluid) and the good people of Ague had sampled enough of the nostrum before Luther appeared so that they were more or less inured to the actual

sound of his singing and playing.

However, their olfactory powers remained acute, and before Luther had finished his first number, several of the spectators were glancing under the wooden seats in an effort to detect the whereabouts of a sick polecat.

Some of the men in the audience considered slipping out quietly and summoning an emergency meeting of the Klan.

Jefferson Davis Fink, astute showman that he was, got the message. And right after the first show, he delivered it to Luther Snodgrass.

"Out, boy," he said. "You finished."

"Finished? But Mistah Fink, suh—"

"Don' you-all *Mistah Fink suh* me, hear? Git!"

"Ah thought Ah sounded purty good out theah tonight."

"Good foh what? Lookkee heah, boy, Ah'm sellin' medicine to make folks feel bright an' sassy. Then you come on, a membah of mah own company, an' you sound like a hog with it's ham caught in a bob-wire fence. Call that smart advertisin'? No, son, you gotta go."

"Please, give me anothuh chance."

"Sorry. Powerful sorry."

"But you-all cain't leave me stranded heah. Got no grit-money, got nothin'—"

"Heah." Jefferson Davis Fink held out a five-dollar-bill and a bottle of *Finkola*. "This ought to see you back to town. You-all-can drink the bottle on the bus. Compliments of the house."

And that was all Luther Snodgrass could get out of him.

In the end he trudged away, guitar in one hand, grip in the other. But the bus station was closed, and there would be no transportation available until ten o'clock the next morning, so Luther didn't go Greyhound.

He picked at his grits and some iguana gumbo in Ague's sole culinary establishment; meanwhile squandering another fifty cents in the juke-box to play the latest recordings by Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and The Platters.

"Ah kin sing evah-bit as good as they," he muttered. "Louder, even!"

The thought—as well as the sounds—understandably depressed him. So much so that after he left the restaurant he spent his remaining capital for a bottle of something called *Old Poontang*—A

Blend: 85% Neutral Spirits, 15% Hostile Spirits. It was something like that, anyway; he didn't bother to read the label. And he didn't bother to delay in consuming the contents. By the time he'd finished, Luther made up his mind to hitch-hike back to New Orleans. He took the road to the Crescent City, but it was very dark outside, and somehow he seemed to have missed his way.

The next thing he remembered was wandering down a bayou byway which led deeper and deeper into the swamps. The night was black as pitch and even smelled that way; tarry bubbles oozed from the swamp as Luther trod a path never used even by day, and then only by Voodoo conjure-men. A mist crept out of the trees, and Luther shivered. He emptied the bottle and tossed it away, then stumbled on.

"Ah'm purely lost," he complained, sitting down on an old log and fishing out the other bottle, containing *Finkola*. He uncorked and attacked it, and before long, it was attacking him.

Perhaps the *Finkola* was to blame. I'm not going to attempt to sway your opinion. You'll have to decide for yourself. At any rate, nothing

happened to Luther Snodgrass until he began to drink the stuff.

"Lost!" he sighed. "Nowhere, U.S.A.!"

It suddenly occurred to him that he was addressing his complaints to an exceedingly large alligator which had crawled up out of the bubbling blackness and was perched on the log beside him.

Luther put his arm around the alligator's neck.

"Whassa matter, ole buddy-buddy?" he asked the saurian. "Y'all look purty green around the gills. What you need is a slurp of *Finkola*." He extended the bottle. "Mebbe it'll help you to git rid o' them warts, too!"

The alligator shook its head politely.

"Party-pooper!" muttered Luther, bitterly. He took another swig. His mood changed. "Ah don't blame you. Nobuddy wants to drink with me. Nobuddy wants to heah me sing an' play. Nobuddy loves me. Ah jus' ain't appreciated, nohow. Why for is evvy-buddy agin us artists?"

The alligator shrugged.

"What's Elvis got that Ah ain't got?" Luther demanded. "How come folks make such a fuss ovah a square piano-

player like this heah Albert Schweitzer?"

The alligator started to squirm off the log.

"Don' leave me!" Luther wailed. "Ah craves sympathy. You see befo' you a beat-down cat. Ah's sick of tryin' the ha'hd way. A man gits fed up, you know? Right now, Ah'd sell mah soul fo' a little ole hunk of prosperity."

The alligator edged away.

"Git me out'n this swamp," Luther implored, clutching vainly at the departing reptile and falling backwards off the log into the muddy ooze. "Take me to your Leader!"

That's what the man said.

Of course, it was only a current phrase; a commonplace expression, like the one about selling one's soul. And naturally, the alligator was only an alligator.

You can interpret it that way if you like. On the other hand, you may choose to believe otherwise.

In either case, all I can do is offer the facts in the matter.

Which were, and are, as follows. Luther fell off the log into the mud. When he sat up again the alligator had disappeared—but there, sitting on the stump-end of the fallen tree, was another pres-

ence. It seemed to be a man; at least its face was slightly less green and slightly less warty than the alligator's had been.

Luther stared up at the stranger.

"Evenin'," he murmured.

"Good evening, son," the stranger replied. "What seems to be the difficulty?"

"Ah fell."

"Hmm, so I perceive. Well, you're not the only one. I've had some previous acquaintance with the fallen." The stranger smiled benignly. "It behooves us, if you'll pardon the expression, to take consolation at times likes these in that glorious motto—"The South shall rise again!" And now, if you'll permit me to assist you—"

He extended a hand and hauled young Luther up to a seat beside him on the log. Luther blinked at him and beheld his benefactor. The stranger was a plump, white-haired gentleman wearing a hammer-tail coat and a modest five-gallon hat.

"Who mought you be?" Luther inquired.

"I might be Judge Harmer," the stranger told him.

"Judge?"

"An honorary title, of course," his companion assured him. "But I'm a real

Harmer, of that you may be sure. Come from a long line of Harmers. Certainly you are familiar with the name?"

"Reckon not," Luther answered. "Ah'm a stranger in these parts. Luther Snodgrass, at yo' service."

"Pleased to meet you." Judge Harmer's eyes twinkled. "But speaking of service, I perceive you have a bottle—"

"He'p yo'self," Luther urged, extending the *Finkola*.

Judge Harmer reached for the bottle, read the label, then hastily drew his hand away. "No, thank you," he muttered. "On second thought—"

"But it's only *Finkola*—"

"I assure you I'm perfectly familiar with the concoction," Judge Harmer replied. "And so again I say, no, thanks."

"You talk awful funny."

"Just plain English."

"Yeah, what I mean. Y'all sound like—pardon the expression—a Yankee." Luther gazed suspiciously at his new acquaintance. "If'n you ain't a real judge, then what are you, anyhow?"

"Call me a talent scout, if you like."

"A talent scout? You mean like for shows and all?"

Judge Harmer nodded.

"Come now!" Luther stood up. "What-all would a talent

scout be doin' out heah in this little ole swamp?"

"Why, looking for talent, of course."

"In a bayou—at midnight?"

"I was informed that there might be a possibility of an informal get-together in these purlieus," the judge explained.

"Who-all would hold a sociable in a place like this?" Luther's eyes narrowed. "Hold on—you-all ain't talkin' about one of them Voodoo meetin's, are you?"

The judge shrugged. "I believe I've heard the term used in that connection, yes."

"But what kind of talent can you git out'n a bunch of conjure men and hexers?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised." The judge smiled. "I understand they sing and dance at such ceremonies. And of course, there are always drummers. There's a great demand for drummers up North, you know. Give a man a set of bongoes instead of a drum and clap a beret on his head and you've got a good non-union Beatnik."

"Nevah figgered it that way befo'," Luther admitted.

"But I fear I was mistaken," the judge continued, consulting his pocket-watch.

Luther couldn't imagine how he could possibly see it in the darkness, but apparently the green and glittering eyes searched out successfully. "Here it is, past midnight, and no meeting in evidence." He sighed. "I don't know what's come over folks nowadays, really I don't! Used to be an average of three meetings a week, regular as clock-work, and a human sacrifice on Sundays. Now everybody stays home and watches Oral Roberts on television." He sighed again. "Apparently I'm wasting my time."

"Hold on!" Luther said. "If it's talent you're after, mebbe Ah'm your boy. If'n Ah kin find mah *git-tar*—"

He stooped and fumbled in the mud at his feet until he located the battered instrument. Raising it, he brushed his fingers lightly across the strings, then turned the guitar and shook it vigorously.

"Dern that toad!" he muttered, then brightened. "Happens that Ah'm a entertainer mah-self. You-all care for an audition?"

"Be delighted." The judge settled himself on the log and Luther, without further preamble, launched into the rendition of a popular ditty entitled *The Hang Down*

Your Head Tom Dooley Cha-Cha-Cha.

Several alligators back in the swamp joined in the second chorus, and Luther finished with a brisk *obligato* which caromed off his left tonsil.

"Well?" he inquired. "What do you think?"

"I think I'll have a drink after all," said the judge, hastily reaching for the *Fink-ola* bottle.

"You didn't like mah singing?"

"I never said that," his audience replied. "In fact, I was merely about to propose a toast."

"What about mah playing?"

"I never heard anything to equal it." The judge took a deep gulp.

"Mebbe you-all'd like to give me a job?"

"My dear boy, I'm no impresario!"

"Is that like an imp, mebbe?"

"In a way." The judge smiled. "Actually, an impresario is a bit worse—he's a man who puts on theatrical performances. Well, as I say, I'm not one of those. I'm merely a sort of talent scout. I only find talent."

"An agent, like?"

"Ah, yes. That would be

closer to the truth. I'm an agent."

"Then you could sign me up?"

"Well—"

"Mebbe you ain't convinced. Mebbe Ah ought to sing again—"

"No!" the judge exclaimed, hurriedly. "No, that won't be necessary at all. I'm quite willing to sign you right now."

"Ten per cent, ain't it?"

"A hundred per cent, if you like."

"That's mighty generous," Luther grinned. "One o' them long-term contracks?"

"Lifetime," the judge assured him. "Better still, in perpetuity."

"Ah was kinda hopin' we could sign right heah."

"Good enough." The judge produced a document—not from his pocket, not from his sleeve, but from somewhere around his person. "Errr—I seem to have mislaid my fountain-pen. But this twig will do. And for ink, let's just prick your finger, here."

"Nothin' doin'!" Luther drew himself proudly erect. "Ah suspicioned you-all was the Devil right along."

"But I'm not the Devil, I swear it—merely an agent!" The judge's tones were unctuous. "Son, this is your big

chance. Don't toss it away because of a technicality!"

"Well, Ah ain't signin' anythin' in mah blood." Luther frowned determinedly, then brightened. "Lookee heah, how's about me signin' in some of this *Finkola*?"

"Hmmm—I don't know—it seems highly irregular—"

"Ain't nothin' irregular about it!" Luther protested. "Ah done heah the raddio announcer tell just the opposite. He say there ain't nothin' like *Finkola* for keepin' you regular."

"I'd prefer blood," the judge murmured.

"You-all want me or don't you?" Luther was solemn. "Ah tell you, friend, it ain't every day you git a chance to heah a talent like mine. You better not pass it by."

The judge sighed. "That's right," he said.

"So what you say?"

The judge sighed again. "Oh, very well. Sign in *Finkola*. After what you've already drunk from the bottle, I'm sure your blood is probably ninety per cent *Finkola* anyway. So there's not much difference."

"You-all want this formal?" Luther inquired. "If so, Ah'll make a capital X."

"Can't you write?" The

judge frowned. "Not even your own name?"

"Course Ah kin! It's the spellin' Ah ain't so sure of." Luther scrawled his X on the document, then reached for the bottle.

"We got us a deal," he said. "Mought as well kill this now."

Apparently the *Finkola* had the same idea, because shortly after swallowing it, Luther gazed at his newfound agent with a contented grin, rolled up his eyes and heels, and passed out.

When he came to, he was in Noiseville, U.S.A.

Now the actual name of the town may be Nashville, or Chattanooga, or even Memphis. All three communities have at times proclaimed—and loudly—their right to be called the music capitals of America.

Call it rock-'n-roll, call it country music, call it hill-billy style, call it something which can't be printed in these pages—the fact remains that these three cities are responsible for more popular entertainment, decibel for decibel, and dollar for dollar, than any other metropolises since Sodom and Gomorrah.

And it was in one of them that Luther Snodgrass awoke.

"Where am Ah?" he wailed.

"Does it matter?" replied Judge Harmer.

"Matter? Ah'll say it does! Must've been drunk as a skunk! Ah do declare, Ah don't even remember mah own name."

"It's Clay Clinton," the judge told him.

"Clay Clinton?" The young man blinked suspiciously. "You sure it ain't Luther Snodgrass?"

"Not after last night it isn't. Don't you remember? You auditioned for me, I signed you up as my client?"

"Yeah, reckon so."

"Well, as your agent, I'm taking over your career. And the first thing I'm doing is changing your name. Luther Snodgrass—that's no good for theater marquees. Takes too many lights. And it's too long for TV credit-cards. You're Clay Clinton."

"Ah'm goin' on television?"

"Eventually. After you've had your vocal lessons."

"Ah don't need none. Ah sing okay."

"I'm not referring to singing. You're going to learn English."

"But who kin unnerstan' Elvis or Jerry Lee Lewis—?"

"I'm not referring to the way you deliver the so-called lyrics of your so-called songs.

It's just that when you talk, it helps to be intelligible."

"You gonna ruin mah style."

"Trust me. From now on you're Clay Clinton, and you're my boy."

"He's *my* boy!"

For the first time Luther heard the strange voice.

He raised his head (he was lying in bed in Room 666 of the Flabbee Arms Hotel at the time) and instantly regretted his effort. It made his skull ache with a hangover, and worse than that, it afforded him a glimpse of the speaker.

A dear little white-haired old lady stood at the judge's side, smiling lovingly at Luther from behind the neck of a gin-bottle. She gazed at him with tender, bloodshot eyes.

"Son," said the judge. "I want you to meet your mother."

"Mother?" Luther sat up. "Not really?"

"Don't ever let me catch you talking like that again," the judge cautioned him. "From now on, you're Clay Clinton, like I said. And this is your dear mother."

"But—"

"It's time, son, that you learned the Facts of Life. Every young popular singing star has a mother, whom he

worships and adores. Not only is it good for reams of publicity, but it can also help to take the heat off if—perish forbid!—he happens to get tangled up with one of those chorus girls in Las Vegas. You understand?"

Luther nodded. "So you hired me a mother, is that it?"

He stared at the little old lady. "Where'd she park her broomstick?"

"If you must know, it's on the roof," the little old lady told him. "My cat is watching it. She's queer for phallic symbols."

"Then you *are* a witch?" Luther swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Ah was only kiddin'— Ah nevah dreamed—"

"Here, where are you going?" the judge demanded.

"Away!" Luther fumbled for his jeans. "Ah don't aim to mess with no witches—"

"We have a contract," Judge Harmer reminded him. "Besides, she's not a practicing witch. She's retired."

"That's right, buster," cackled the old woman. "The judge hired me right out of the Old Spook's Home."

"But Ah don't need no super-type-natural Mamma."

"No. But you do need

an English instructor. And that's something your new mother can do for you. She can teach you how to speak properly. Besides, I want someone around here to keep an eye on you while I'm away."

"You goin' somewheres?"

"Of course. I'm an agent. You're not my only client, you know. I've got people in New York, Miami, Hollywood, who need my help. But ask your mother. She can tell you."

And in the days that followed, she did.

Mother proved to be an apt instructor. During the next few weeks, the new Clay Clinton stayed in his room with her and she patiently taught him the rudiments of grammar and pronunciation. Using such standard texts as *Downbeat* and *Variety*, he gradually enlarged his vocabulary.

The judge appeared three weeks later.

"Well?" he inquired. "How is it going?"

"Crazy, man!" Luther informed him. "Mom falls up to the pad here, making the scene with the English bit every day, and I'm coming on strong. I mean, it's like a gasser, Dad. You dig?"

The judge beamed. "My

boy, I'm proud of you!" he declared. "All that vulgar Southern accent has disappeared—now *anyone* can understand what you're saying. Son, I do believe you're almost ready."

"Almost? Like I'm the most, Daddy-O." Luther paced the floor. "I'm with it, Pops. Solid."

"Not so fast. First we'll have to work on your musical education."

"What's with the music, Clyde? I make with my pipes, I belt it out and they flip. I mean like they'll love it."

The judge shook his head. "You need polish. That's another thing Mother is here to teach you." He turned to the little old lady. "Let him study for another couple of weeks," he commanded. "With the cat."

"The cat? Which cat?"

"My black cat," Mother told him. "She's got just the right *vibrato* for a popular singer these days. Real fish-shaped tones."

So for two weeks, Luther listened to the cat. The cat didn't always feel like howling, but mother belted it regularly with her broomstick and belted herself with the gin-bottle as Luther listened and learned.

When the judge returned

he was properly impressed. Luther did a number for him.

"Wonderful," Judge Harmer exclaimed. "Why, you can't hardly tell him and the cat apart!"

"He's a good boy," mother declared. "You know, Judge, I had my doubts when you took me out of straight sorcery and made me get into show biz. I thought you were like putting me down. But this is the greatest! Sticking pins into wax figures, all that jazz—it's funky compared to working with live talent. And when I think of all the harm I can do—"

She cackled and tackled her gin.

"Never mind that now," the judge cautioned, with a warning look in Luther's direction. "We're going to put the finishing touches on his education now. I think we're ready for Eddie."

"Eddie?" Luther echoed. "Who's he?"

"Eddie Puss, at your service—blowing cool and plenty nervous!" A dapper little bald-headed man bounded into the room. "Ah, Mother, good to see you! Share some skin!" He shook hands enthusiastically. "Same old fascinating witch, eh? Have broom, will travel. Righter-ooni?"

"This is Eddie Puss," the judge said. "He writes songs."

"Not my real name, of course," the little man said, grinning at Luther. "They slapped the handle on me because I write a lot of *Mother* numbers. Eddie Puss, like in the complex and all that jazz, dig? Also, because I'm quite a cat."

"But I don't need a songwriter," Luther objected, in his newfound English. "I'm the most."

"Everybody needs songwriters in this business," the judge told him. "How do you suppose a hit singer operates these days? They all have to write their own numbers in order to get into the Top Ten. And that's where people like Eddie come in handy. They can do the coaching. Teach you the ropes." He turned to the little man. "How about it—what do you think?"

"Well, I don't know." Eddie Puss surveyed Luther with a calculating eye. "He's almost too old, don't you think? I mean, what we need like is young blood. Most big hits, they're written by kids still in high school. Freshmen are best. Me, I've even worked with seniors, but it's hard."

"He's really very childish,"

the judge reassured him. "I want you to try."

"I can't promise anything—"

"You wouldn't be going back on our agreement, would you?" The judge was suave. "Remember what you were when I met you? Just a frustrated lyric-writer. All you ever were able to do was those four-line poems on the walls of public—"

"Never mind!" Eddie Puss shuddered. "I appreciate what you've done, and like I say, I'll try."

"Then get busy," the judge muttered. "I want this boy in shape for his debut in two weeks. Teach him the popular song business."

So Luther learned the popular song business from yet another teacher.

"Really nothing to it," Eddie reassured him, during the course of their daily lessons. "It's as simple as NBC. All you got to remember is that there are only two kinds of pop hits today. One of 'em is about a couple of high school kids in love, and the other makes even less sense. The main thing is, you have to remember to include certain phrases in each lyric."

"Such as?"

"Well, we got what we call key-words. You know 'em."

"You mean like *heart*, and *tears*, and *embrace*?"

"Crazy, man! Only you never use 'em that way. You make with the phrase. So it comes out, *this heart of mine*, and *these tears in my eyes*, and *your fond embrace*. Whatever you do, never change a single word. Here's the rest of the list—dig it, because it's all you're gonna need to write dozens of songs. *The touch of your lips. They don't understand. I hold your charms. Each thrilling moment. Of love divine.*" He paused. "And one thing more. The most important bit. Every couple of lines, you got to throw in the word, *baby.*"

Mother was crying. "I always was one to snap my cap over poetry."

Luther himself was equally impressed.

"See how easy it is?" Eddie remarked. "With me helping you on lyrics and the cat here giving you the tunes, we can't miss."

And they didn't.

Two weeks later, to the day, Judge Harmer appeared in the hotel room.

"Everything in readiness?" he demanded. Mother and Eddie Puss beamed proudly and the cat purred at Luther and nodded.

"Prepare to dig your wig, Big Daddy," Luther said, picking up his guitar. "We've got a smasheroo."

And he launched into the world premiere of the number now universally known as, *If I Had To Do It All Over Again, I'd Do It All Over You*.

For a moment after the last note sickened and died away there was an impressive silence in the little room.

Then the telephone jingled and Judge Harmer picked it up.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I understand. Right away."

He replaced the phone in its cradle and turned to the gathering with a smile of relief.

"Management is getting complaints on the noise," he said, happily. "We're being evicted."

"Then it registered," Eddie Puss-muttered.

"It must have. Come on, let's get started."

"Where are we going?" Luther was puzzled.

"To New York, of course. For your debut. I understand that Hank Corrupta is replacing Terry Coma at the Club Sandwich on Saturday."

"Corrupta? He's with that rival outfit, MCA, isn't he?" Eddie demanded.

"Right. We got to get rid of him. And we will." Judge Harmer grinned. "What he doesn't know is that our boy here will be replacing him."

"But how—?" Luther murmured.

"You'll see." The judge turned. "Start packing, we're off to the big city."

Mother started for the window.

"Where are you going?" the judge demanded.

"I was just after my broomstick—"

"We're traveling by TWA this time," he told her. "Never mind the expense. Besides, I'll need your services *en route*."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Get three pounds of wax—no, two will do, Corrupta's pretty skinny. Make me a poppet. And then—"

"With the pins, eh? Give him the old stab-and-jab routine?" Mother cackled.

"No, he wouldn't even feel the needle. He'd just think it was a fast fix. I've got a better idea." And the judge whispered something in her ear.

She cackled again.

And she continued to cackle on the plane, as she sat beside Luther and moulded a

wax figurine which took on an eerie resemblance to Hank Corrupta.

"Why, it's amazing!" Luther marveled. "Where did you ever learn to model like that?"

"In my younger days I used to work for Disney," the crone confided. "I was a stand-in for *The Reluctant Dragon*. I picked up a lot of techniques from his artists."

"Well, it's certainly a remarkable job," the young man said. "Even those hands are perfect."

"They have to be," the old woman said. "Because of this." She began to mumble over the mannikin and then, suddenly, she reached out and squeezed the waxen right hand.

"You—you *crushed* it!" Luther exclaimed.

"Natch. And I just got you a job!" she predicted.

Luther didn't believe it.

Not until he arrived in New York and Judge Harmer showed him the announcement in Ed Sullivan's column. Hank Corrupta would not be opening at the Club Sandwich on Saturday night after all.

"Lost his voice?" Luther wondered, aloud.

"Worse than that," the

judge declared, smugly. "Read what it says. He can't sing because he hurt his hand and he won't be able to snap his fingers!"

"But I still don't see—"

"Leave everything to me. I'm going down to the Club Sandwich right now and talk to the boys about putting you on."

"You have connections?"

"In this business, you've got to have connections. Why, the Musician's Union and I are just like that." He held up two fingers, then drew them across his throat.

Luther shivered.

He was still shivering after the judge had left.

"What's the matter, boy?" asked Eddie Puss. "What gives?"

"I'm scared," Luther confessed.

"What's to be scared of? You're all set. You've let your sideburns grow, you haven't combed your hair in a month, and if you shiver like that on stage tonight nobody can tell you from Elvis himself."

"It's not that. It's like I never really believed what the judge said before. And I never thought mother was a real witch—"

"Wise up, buster," the old woman said. "How do you think anyone gets ahead in

show business these days? It sure enough ain't talent."

"You mean it's all the result of magic?"

"What do you think? You've watched television, haven't you? How else could half of those ham-bones get on in the first place?"

"But I've always thought —"

"Never mind what you thought. This is it, pal. This is the big time!"

And it was.

That evening, at ten o'clock, Luther Snodgrass, *alias* Clay Clinton, stepped up to the microphone of the Club Sandwich and brandished the gold guitar which Judge Harmer had slipped into his surprised fingers just before his number was announced.

And he killed the people.

"I did it!" Luther marveled, at the impromptu party following his performance. "I really sent them!" He laughed happily and nudged Eddie Puss in the ribs. "And it was me, singing and playing up there. That's what they dug the most—me. Nobody hoo-dooed them into applauding. And to think I almost fell for that line about witchcraft!"

"Yeah," said Eddie.

"You were ribbing me, weren't you? I mean, you're

just a lyric-writer. The judge is a smart agent, but he's only human. Mother gets stoned and thinks she's a witch, but that's for the birds. I see it now—you were all in it together, a real swinging combo, feeding me that jazz so I'd keep up my confidence."

"Yeah," said mother.

"But from now on, we're straight up and flying right. I get the message—you can level with me. Because I'm not scared any more. I know I can punch over a number. So let's forget all that Creepville jazz."

"Yeah," said the cat . . .

And Luther Snodgrass forgot witchcraft from then on. In a little while he almost forgot his own name. Because he was Clay Clinton now, and there wasn't time to think about anything else.

Judge Harmer kept him busy.

First of all, there was the recording bit.

"Records," the judge told him. "That's where the big loot is made. I'm going to get you into every juke-box in the country."

"But I'm not even signed with a recording outfit," Luther protested.

"Who needs it?" Eddie Puss demanded. "What we do

is, we set up our own wax-works. That way we don't just collect the royalties—we get profit on distribution, the whole package.”

“But how can we be sure the records will become popular? How can we get them spinning?”

“Through the dee-jays,” Eddie told him. “They can make you or break you.”

“Can Judge Harmer get the disc-jockeys to play our waffles?”

Eddie Puss smiled grimly. “Believe me,” he said, “some of his best friends are disc-jockeys. When it comes to going after a fast buck, he doesn't care who he associates with or how low he stoops!”

And so Clay Clinton's gold guitar was matched by his growing collection of gold records. Remember his clever modern adaptation of great classical favorites—*Rock-'n-Roll Of Ages* and *When The Rock-'n-Roll Is Called Up Yonder* and all the rest? Or would you rather forget?

The point is, the public didn't forget. It never had a chance to do so. Clay Clinton was on every radio show. Clay Clinton was in every juke-box. Clay Clinton moved from the Club Sandwich to top spots in Chicago, Detroit,

St. Louis, Miami. Clay Clinton appeared in theaters and auditoriums. Clay Clinton guested for his fan-clubs. Clay Clinton did his act on the *U. S. A. Grandstand* television show, and two fourteen-year-old girls tore off his pink shoelaces for souvenirs.

He acquired a wardrobe of sixty suits and a fleet of nine Cadillac convertibles, and eventually reached such heights of success that he was seriously thinking about going to a psychiatrist.

But he just didn't have the time. There was never any time, any more.

Eddie Puss had long since dropped out of sight. “You don't need him,” the judge decided. “From now on, you plug standard tunes. Besides, I've got other assignments for him to handle.”

That was something Luther had learned; he was indeed far from the only client Judge Harmer dealt with. It seemed, in his travels through the enchanted realms of show business, that the judge had connections everywhere. Although he specialized in teenage talent, it almost appeared as though teen-agers had taken over the bulk of the entertainment outlets in the country. Between rock-'n-roll singers and progressive jazz

combos, they dominated the musical end, and there was little else.

"Of course, there's the movies to be considered," the judge said, thoughtfully. "I've got something working for me out there."

"You mean you're active in Hollywood too?" Luther marveled.

"Why not? Who do you think is responsible for all those pictures about juvenile delinquents? If it wasn't for the how-to-do-it movies, the average kid wouldn't know how to handle a switch-blade or smoke a reefer."

"You're kidding, of course," Luther said.

"And then there's the monster-movies," the judge went on. "That's a pretty important department. You know the kind—*I Was A Teen-Age Supreme Court Justice*, and *Invasion of the Giant Spirochetes*? I've been promoting them pretty heavily, and with fine results. Ten years ago there was a lot of silly talk about motion-picture audiences with a mental age of twelve. Well, we've made a lot of progress since then. I think we've got it down to around seven. Of course, this doesn't include western fans or Mickey Spillane addicts, or

the people who think a girl is hiding her talent if she wears a brassiere. If we included them, we'd have the index of intelligence down to about five years of age."

"I doubt it," Luther mused.

"Well, I can dream, can't I?" the judge retorted.

"Look here," said Luther. "You aren't serious, are you? You don't really want to put out all this crud? I mean, in my spare time between shows, I've been doing quite a bit of reading on my own—"

"Reading?" The judge raised his eyebrows. "Mother had strict orders to keep you on *Billboard* and *Mad Comics*."

"Mother isn't around much," Luther confessed. "When all this loot started pouring in she came to me and hinted about retiring. Said it wasn't so much her idea as it was the cat's. It seems like the cat had always wanted to settle down in a little vine-covered cottage and raise mice for a hobby. And for twenty thousand dollars, mother found just the place—not exactly a cottage, but a lovely old liquor store. She said that with all that wine and stuff around she wouldn't need any vines. So I bought it for her, and she cut out."

"Leaving you to read, eh?" The judge frowned.

"Well, like why not? I mean, I dig education the most. I figure education is one of the best forms of learning, particularly if you want to know something. And like that there."

"It's corrupting your taste, son. Pretty soon it will affect your art."

"I meant to flip my lip about that, too." Luther sighed.

"You know, sometimes I wonder if all this singing I do is really the living end. I get to thinking it's cornball. Now you take this character Boris Pasternak and what he says about the artistic conscience bit—"

"Look." Judge Harmer put his hand on Luther's shoulder. "You're a singer. I'm your agent. I made you. I have further plans. Your only job is to carry them out."

"But why? I'm making plenty of money now. I could retire on royalties. And you've got other clients, a lot of them."

"It isn't a question of money. It's a question of ethics."

"Ethics?"

"Sure, what else have we been talking about? Ethics—I want to degrade them. I won't rest until the whole world is rocking and rolling."

"But why?"

"Because it's my duty, that's why. Just as it's mother's duty to be a respectable, practicing witch instead of running off to lush it up in a liquor store. Not that I have anything against luses, understand—they're, quite acceptable, in a way. But the major task comes first. To corrupt, and to destroy."

Luther grinned. "So you're back to that old line again," he said. "Trying to scare me with that phoney superstition talk. Well, it won't work. I've come a long way since you met me in the swamp."

"And you can go right back there if you aren't careful," the judge retorted. "Very well, I have no intention of convincing you that I'm an emissary of infernal powers. Just let me say this, though — when you argue against bad taste, you're arguing against your own bread and butter, to say nothing of the necessities of life, such as caviar and champagne. Forget all this nonsense about self-improvement."

"But I don't want to forget—"

"Then remember this. You and I have a contract. And according to the terms, I'm

entitled to plan your itinerary. From now on I'll see to it that you're so busy you won't have time to read or moon around with a lot of egghead ideas, either."

The judge stood up. "Start packing," he said. "I'm taking you right to the Home Office." He frowned grimly.

Luther gulped. "Now, look here," he said. "Don't put me down."

"Put you down? That's a good one." Judge Harmer chuckled gutturally.

"It isn't that I believe you, or anything," Luther quavered. "But you keep talking about the Home Office. I understand that the climate in Hell is pretty bad."

The judge laughed again. "Who said anything about Hell? Where I'm taking you, the climate is even worse. This is the twentieth century, son, and we move with the times. Our Home Office is in Hollywood!"

Luther Snodgrass was in Hollywood for exactly three days when he met Mary Jane Hawkins. He happened to be sitting in the outer office of Judge Harmer's agency office on Vermont when the girl walked in.

He watched the little blonde request an interview

from the receptionist, and saw her receive the usual brush-off—the *don't-call-us-we'll-call-you* routine. He noted how her shoulders sagged, and noted too how other salient portions of her anatomy remained fascinatingly firm.

Then she turned away, and saw him sitting there, and something happened.

It was hate at first sight.

"Clay Clinton!" the girl exclaimed. "Aaargh!"

"What?" said Luther, rising to his feet.

"Aaargh!" the little blonde repeated. "Also pfaugh!"

"I don't dig you, chick."

Mary Jane moved closer and peered up at him. "You *are* Clay Clinton, aren't you?"

"Well—like yes, I guess so."

"Then blecchhh," she told him. "To say nothing of bracchhh. And, if you'll pardon the expression, *pfui!*"

"Now wait a minute, doll. Listen to me—"

"I *have* listened to you," Mary Jane told him. "Which is precisely what I mean when I say—"

"Let's not go through that routine again," Luther said, hastily. "It hurts me to hear such sounds coming out of a lush thrush like you."

"You're a fine one to talk,"

the girl retorted. "What about the sounds *you* make?"

"Are you knocking my singing?" Luther demanded.

"Singing!" She sighed dismally. "That's what you call it, eh?"

"Well, I may not be the greatest," Luther admitted, "but it's a living. I mean, I got nine Cadillacs, and—"

"Sure. You've got nine Cadillacs. And meanwhile, a girl like me can't even get an audition from an agent. That's because I have a trained voice and all the public wants to hear nowadays is a lot of screeching. You and your kind are responsible for that."

"Now don't make a federal case out of it," Luther murmured. "Don't hang me, judge!"

"I wish I could. I happen to love music, and when I think of what you've done to ruin singing in this country, I could just scream."

"In what key?"

"Now you're making fun of me." Mary Jane stamped her foot petulantly, and it was Luther who screamed, because she came down on his toes.

"Ohh—I'm sorry—I didn't mean to lose my temper—"

"That's all right," Luther told her.

"I apologize for being so rude."

"You only told the truth."

"*What?*" She stared at him.

"I know I can't sing," Luther said.

"But—"

"Let me explain." He smiled at her. "Kind of a long story, so I won't do a stand-up routine. How about lunch?"

Cadillac Number Seven (the pink one, with the purple upholstery) happened to be on the parking lot outside, and he drove her to the Derby. And it was there that he told her the story.

"I can't believe it," she murmured, shaking her head slowly.

"This is Truthville, U.S.A.," Luther insisted.

"But it's fantastic!" Mary Jane wrinkled her forehead. "It's absurd to think of the Devil trying to take over the entertainment and television industry in this town! Besides, he wouldn't have a chance, as long as Desi Arnaz is around."

"I didn't go for the bundle myself, really," Luther confessed. "Not until Judge Harmer brought me out here and I dug what went on around his office. In the past couple of days I've seen him

do business with half the weirdies in show biz."

He described some of the no-talent he'd met—the orchestra leaders who couldn't read music and their musicians who couldn't play a note as written—the offbeat young actors from the torn-shirt schools of drama who seemed to have a madness in their Method—the dancers whose movements depended less on choreography than on the tightness of their underwear.

"All right," Mary Jane conceded. "I know a lot of these people are bad. But that doesn't mean they're part of some organized conspiracy. Aren't you exaggerating just a trifle?"

Luther shook his head earnestly. "Has to be a plot," he insisted. "How else would all those idiot M.C.s get jobs on those daytime give-away shows? Where do all the loud-mouthed announcers come from with their pitches for pile remedies?"

"But surely it's not the Devil's work?"

"Oh, no?" Luther stared at her triumphantly. "Who do you think invented the singing commercial?"

"Well—"

The girl was weakening.

"You heard how I got into

this racket," Luther continued. "Judge Harmer admitted he was an agent, didn't he? He laid it on me about how he was out to ruin the public's taste. It figures."

"Yes, it figures." Mary Jane nodded at him. "You're a nice person, Clay. I misjudged you."

"Call me Luther," he begged.

"All right—Luther. I'm ashamed of the way I acted when we met. Now that you've told me your story, I think I'm beginning to understand the situation. And I'd like to help you."

"You can't help me," Luther said. "I never knew until recently that I was no good, and that the reason I was hired was just because I was so terrible. But it's too late to do anything about that now. I'm under contract."

"Contracts can be broken."

"This one is in perpetuity." Luther smiled and shrugged. "When the judge told me that, I thought he was talking about a place. Since then I've done a little reading, you know? I'm up on all this long-hair talk."

"Like paranoid delusions; for example?"

"Huh?"

"Like sick-sick-sick," the

girl explained, patiently. "Rationalizing your sudden success into a diabolical conspiracy."

"Stop making like a square," Luther begged her. "All I know is, I've got a contract. I'm hooked."

"You really believe this?"

"If I don't, may I drop dead and work for Lawrence Welk."

Mary Jane bit her lip. "Please—watch your language."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too." She gazed at him for a long moment. "Well, if there is something to what you say, then maybe there's a way out."

"Like what?"

"Perhaps you need to be exorcised."

"I get all the exercise I need at the hotel swimming-pool."

"Not exercise — *exorcise*. That means to cast out demons."

"You mean there's a way to get rid of the Devil?"

"I wouldn't know. But I do know there are a lot of psychic mediums in this town. Some of them claim to be able to communicate with spirits. Suppose you went to one and presented your problem? Maybe something could be done."

"But I wouldn't know where to find a cat like that."

"Let's try the Yellow Pages."

And sure enough, in one of the five phone-books of Greater Los Angeles, they discovered Dunn.

Medium Dunn turned out to be a little old man who operated a spiritualist parlor on Fairfax, above one of those used-clothing shops which specialized in selling the discarded costumes of motion picture stars. There was a big sale on leopard-skin trusses left over from an old Tarzan movie in the downstairs section, but up above all was quiet.

Little Mr. Dunn listened to Luther's story in silence and seemed not at all surprised at his client's revelations.

"Do you think you can help him?" Mary Jane asked.

"I'm not sure." The little old man cupped his hand to his ear. "Who did you say it was held your contract?"

"Judge Harmer. At least, that's what he calls himself."

"Judge Harmer." The cupped hand trembled perceptibly. "I was afraid I'd heard the name."

"Then you know him?"

"Yes. He's got quite a reputation in certain circles."

“Could you exorcise his influence?”

Medium Dunn shook his head slowly. “Judge Harmer is mighty big in this town,” he said. “Mighty big. He’s got quite a large and dependent following.”

“Then there’s nothing you can do?”

“I didn’t say that.” Medium Dunn peered out of the window at the pink Cadillac. “For a reasonable offering—say a thousand dollars—I can put you in touch with certain parties who have the power to negotiate. Mind you, I couldn’t help you break the contract; I can’t promise that. All I can do is open the way for a meeting.”

“A conference?”

“You might call it that.”

“When? Where?”

“Now. And right here. If you happen to have the thousand on you. Or are you one of those people who never carry more than fifty dollars in cash?”

“I never signed for those ads,” Luther told him, pulling out an alligator billfold and prying open its jaws. “Here’s the loot.”

Medium Dunn glanced at the girl. “I’m going to ask you to step outside and wait,” he said.

Mary Jane departed for

the reception room and settled down with a bundle of old psychic magazines. She buried her nose in a copy of *The Saturday Evening Ghost* and kept it there, even when the smell of burning sulphur issued from behind the closed doors. She could hear the scraping of chalk on the floor and the sound of an eery chant. Then there was silence.

Inside the darkened room, Luther Snodgrass lay on a couch. He too could smell the sulphur, hear the chalk tracing a curious geometrical figure which resembled nothing so much as a pentagram with two pairs of pents. And then he listened to the chanting. His eyes closed, and the chanting rose to a faint and faroff wail. The smoke rose around him in the darkness. And then—

And then he was rising, not to walk but to swoop through space. He was rising, or was he falling? He didn’t know, because all at once there were no directions any more; no *up*, no *down*. But Luther moved, moved through blackness into deeper night. And there was a circle of light which moved with him, supporting his substance until he stood silently before the shadows.

Behind the shadows were stars, and he realized then that he must be in outer space.

"I'm way out," he said.

The shadows stirred. Stirred and blurred. Blurred and brightened.

Now he could see the enormous outlines of the crouching figures, stare into the gigantic eyes which held all emptiness. There were two figures, four eyes. He faced them, puzzlement overriding panic.

"Two?" he muttered to himself. "I always thought there was only one—"

"There is one," came the reply. "But he is not here. We are but judges."

"Judges? What do I need with a judge?"

"You wish to discuss a contract, is that not so?"

"Yes."

"Then it is a matter of law, and judges are required."

"I never thought of it that way."

"We will hear your plea."

"Well—"

"Proceed. There is no time to waste. The Devil will find work for idle hands to do." Two pairs of gigantic hands reached towards Luther's neck, and he retreated hastily to the center of the circle of light.

"I get the message," he said, shuddering. "But it's really just a simple bit. You see, there's this deal I have on with Judge Harmer, if you happen to know him—"

"We know him. He is our brother."

"Ullp! Your brother, eh?"

Luther hesitated, then plunged on. "Well, we had this little agreement, dig? Only now I want out. That's all there is to it. I want out."

"You signed a contract?"

"Uh—yes."

"Then you are committed. There is no legal way to free yourself of obligation unless he releases you."

"But couldn't you persuade him?"

"Why should we?"

"Can't I buy my way out?"

"With what?"

"Money. Loot. Moola. Look, I'm loaded. I've got nine Cadillacs—"

"What do we want with your Cadillacs? We do not run a used-car lot. Although, naturally, we do business with many used-car dealers."

There was faint amusement in the booming voice, but none in Luther's quivering whisper.

"But there must be some way I can lick this thing. If you don't want money, what do you want?"

There was a long pause until the voices came again.

"We do not buy."

"We do not sell."

"But at times we trade."

"Trade what?"

"An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth."

"I didn't sell any eyes or teeth."

"We know what you sold."

"So shall we say—a soul for a soul?"

"Another soul in exchange for mine? But whose—"

"There is a girl. One who trusts you."

"Now, hold it—"

"If you were to take her to Judge Harmer, she would go willingly enough. You would tell her you were mistaken about him, that it was all a delusion on your part. You would say that you were using your influence to secure her an opportunity. It could be arranged for the judge to offer her a contract. Once she signs, you are released."

"That would be a fair exchange."

"Like hell it would! Nothing doing!"

"Then your plea is dismissed."

"But—"

"Go."

The huge hands reached forth. And the voices boomed.

"A final warning. Do not

attempt to evade your contract. This time you have come to us. But next time we can come to you."

The hands swooped down and Luther moved. He blurred his way through darkness and then he was falling into the endless emptiness beyond the stars. Falling back on the couch in the little room. Yes, he was there once more, and awake. He could smell the sulphur.

Only it wasn't sulphur, now. It was something else. Something like brimstone—

"How'd you make out?" Medium Dunn inquired.

Luther blinked and sat up. *"You mean you don't know?"* he asked. *"You didn't see them, or hear them?"*

"I noted nothing," the little old man said. *"You appeared to be in a deep trance. Quite similar to that of a hypnotic subject."* He brightened. *"I happen to be a competent hypnotist, too,"* he continued. *"In case you are ever in need of such services—"*

"Never mind," Luther said, rising.

"I am adept at Reichian psychotherapy," Dunn said. *"Orgone treatments day or night, by appointment."*

"Not interested."

"Tea leaf readings?" Me-

dium Dunn grasped his arm as he hastened towards the door. "How about a high colonic—?"

"Let's get out of here," Luther gasped, pulling Mary Jane to her feet and leading her over to the stairway.

"You might stop downstairs," Medium Dunn called hopefully. "Tell them I sent you and get a ten per cent discount. I understand they have something special in Jayne Mansfield's old bras—"

The smog was reddening into sunset as they reached the street. Luther opened the door of the Caddy and helped the girl to enter.

"How did it go?" she asked. "What happened?"

"Wait," he said. "I don't want to talk here."

They drove in silence up through the hills. In spite of what the TV comics say, it is possible to find a certain serenity in the darkness on Mulholland Drive. And it was there, gazing down across the neon nonentity that is the city, that Luther told Mary Jane of his experience.

"Or was it a dream?" he concluded. "I don't know."

"In any case, you protected me," the girl said. "I'm proud of you."

"I'm not proud," Luther an-

swered. "I'm scared. If it *was* just a cooky dream, then I'm flipping. And if it happens to be real, well—"

"Forget it," Mary Jane commanded.

"How?"

She showed him. Nice girl or no, Mulholland Drive has a magic all its own. And as she entered his arms, Luther murmured, "Don't worry, baby. I won't let anybody hurt you. And I'm going to get out of this deal, wait and see—"

Suddenly he froze. For there was no need to wait and see. He was seeing, right now.

He was seeing the neon lights blotted out, obscured by the huge talons which descended from the sky, shoving aside the stars as they scrambled towards him.

"Honey, what's the matter?" Mary Jane whimpered.

The claws came closer. Luther shuddered.

"They're here," he whispered. "They're watching. They know they can't have you—and they won't let me touch you, either."

"You're imagining these things," the girl reassured him. "I don't see anything."

"I do."

"Look." She sat upright, faced him, grasped his hands.

"You're not well. You ought to get out of here, go away from all this. I'll come with you."

"But—"

"Let me take care of you. I want to."

"We'd be poor." Luther glanced up at the sky nervously.

"Who cares?"

"But you don't know what a raunchy character I was when I was poor. Strictly a no-goodnik. Anything for kicks. I was willing to sell my soul—"

"You're not like that any more. We'd get along, I'm sure we would."

"No." Luther was watching something outside the car. He didn't look at her.

"You don't love me, is that it?"

He looked at her then. "Of course I do. Can't you understand? I *want* to go. But they won't let me. They have a contract. They have plans for me. Me and my lousy voice."

"All right." Mary Jane turned away. "I guess I do understand, after all. There's no need to hand me a line about how you hate what you're doing, or dream up any more stories about the Devil. I can take a hint. When it comes to a choice between me and nine Cadillacs—"

"It's not that at all," he protested. "There isn't a Cadillac made that can compare with you. Why, I'd trade them all in for just one—"

"I'm not an automobile dealer," she sniffed. "Just take me home, please."

"But—"

"Please," she repeated, kicking him politely in the shins.

Luther drove her home in silence.

And all the way, the shadowy hands followed him across the sky, and somewhere between the stars the eyes blazed down . . .

Judge Harmer was waiting for him beside the swimming pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

"Where have you been, son?" he demanded. "What have you been up to?"

"I—" Luther hesitated, gulping.

"Don't tell me, I already know." Harmer raised a pudgy hand and smiled. "Well, it doesn't matter. I'm sure you've learned your lesson. Now we can just let bygones be bygones and get down to business."

"Business?"

The judge nodded. "I didn't bring you out here for a rest cure," he said. "Though

speaking for myself, I could certainly use a black sabbatical. It's time to go to work. I've just been talking to the Boss."

"The Boss?"

"Who else? He's out here, too. Just got in from Las Vegas. And he's a little worried about the opposition."

"What opposition?"

"There are certain signs of good taste creeping into the field, and he doesn't like it. You know, things like Playhouse 90, some of those Sunday egghead shows. And movies are improving, too. We've got to hit, and hit hard. That's where you come in. At midnight, Monday, in my office. He wants to meet you then."

"Supposing I refuse?"

Judge Harmer glanced up at the sky.

"Nice clear weather we're having. I'd hate to see a storm come up over the week end."

Luther sighed. "What does he have in mind for me?"

"First of all, we're lining up a regular television show for you. A full thirty-nine-week series, every hour staged like a spectacular. You know the bit—lots of guest stars for you to insult and call by their first names, plenty of novelty acts with chimpan-

zees. You've seen those dance-numbers they stage where three creeps in tights come out and swish around the singer? Well, money is no object—we're going to hire six creeps for your show! Already lined up a sponsor; he's one of the biggest laxative manufacturers in the business. We're going to have singing commercials, too. Remember all these cigarette programs where big burly guys go around puffing on cigarettes as soon as they've finished wrestling an alligator or jumping from a plane without a parachute? The ones where everybody has a tattoo on the back of his hand? Well, the sponsor came up with a great gimmick. Our guys are going to be tattooed on—hey, what's the matter, son?"

Luther groaned.

"Sounds like hard work, eh? Don't worry. You'll have writers. The best. We'll hire five of 'em just to turn out adlibs for you. The same guys who make up all the jokes about how Ed Sullivan looks like an undertaker, or an undertaker's customer. And that's not all."

"Moré, yet?"

"Certainly! Boss wants you to make a movie. He's doing the script himself. It's called

I Was A Teen-Age Chicken-Plucker For The—"

"No!" Luther gasped. "No, not that!"

The judge glanced at the sky again and gestured with his cigar. Something brushed Luther's cheek, and a gigantic shadow blurred past him. There was a great splash in the swimming pool and the water suddenly began to steam.

"Hold it," Judge Harmer said, grasping Luther's collar. "I'd hate to see you fall into that pool. Looks to me like it's full of crocodiles, too—you see?"

Luther took one glance, then turned away. "Monday at midnight, you said?" His voice was dull.

"Right! In my office, remember. That gives you the whole week-end to rest up." Harmer nodded briskly and stepped away. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I have an engagement at Forest Lawn."

"At this hour?"

"The young lady prefers it," Judge Harmer chuckled. "Perhaps you'd care to join us? I'm sure we could dig up a date for you."

Luther shook his head and ran down the path towards his guest-house.

"See you Monday night, then," the judge called.

"Meanwhile, take care of your voice. We're counting on you."

Luther took care of his voice. He used it immediately, to call Mary Jane.

"I'm sorry," he said, over the phone. "I know you're making with the mad bit at me, and this is no time to bother you. But I'm really in trouble, and I've got to talk to someone. Unless you can help me—"

"I'll be right over," said Mary Jane Hawkins.

"Good." Luther glanced out of the window. "I was hoping you'd say that. Somehow, I don't care to go out at night myself. Not right now."

"Stay where you are. I understand."

She came over, just as she promised, and Luther told her the story.

And then, I think, is when Mary Jane came up with her idea. I say I *think*, but I'm not sure.

You see, I hadn't made the scene yet. In fact, I hadn't even met Luther Snodgrass.

I didn't meet him until Monday night.

That's when he walked into Judge Harmer's office and saw me, sitting all alone behind the big desk.

He stared at me as I check-

ed my watch. It was midnight, right on the head.

His eyes bulged. "You're the boss?" he murmured. "You?"

I smiled. "Why not?"

"But—"

"What did you expect, a long red tail?" I laughed and brushed the cigarette ashes from my sports-jacket.

"You're just a man, aren't you?" He was utterly deflated. "And here, all along, I've been thinking—"

"I know what you've been thinking." I shrugged. "That's what comes of too much reading, my boy. You've been digging the *Faust* bit, haven't you? And *Damn Yankees*, and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter*? and all that jazz. You've got the idea that anyone can sell his soul for talent. Let's face it, *you're* not talented."

Luther nodded at me. "That's right. But the way I had it figured out, from what Judge Harmer told me, the Devil wasn't interested in real talent. He just wanted to corrupt everyone's taste, spoil their standards. From then on, he would find it easier to influence their morals. It was all a gigantic plot, and it sounded pretty logical to me. I mean, if the Devil were around today, he'd naturally

go into the advertising business, and television, and public relations—"

"Please!" I raised my hand. "I grant you it all sounds logical. And if I were the Devil, I just might encourage people to produce shows like *Damn Yankees* and the rest, simply to be subtle and put the idea into folks' heads that it's possible to cook up a deal. But I'm not the Devil, as you can plainly see."

"Then Judge Harmer is crazy?"

"Like a fox," I told him. "The judge knows what he's doing. He's lined up a great career for you out here. You're going to come on strong. And that's what I want to talk to you about tonight. First, the television series—"

"You really are serious about this? Even though you know I'm lousy?"

"Let the great American Public be the ones to decide." I stared at him. "I see you brought your guitar. Good. There's a new number I want you to try—the theme-song for the show." I reached into my desk and brought forth a sheaf of sheet music. "Here it is. Brand new tune, be up there in the Top Ten three weeks after you introduce it. Great title, too. *Strontium-90*

Daddy, Don't You Fall Out On Me!"

He took the music and held it awkwardly.

"Prop it against the book-ends here and let's give it a try," I said. "Just run through it cold. I don't expect a finished performance—all I want is a general idea."

Luther Snodgrass nodded and raised his guitar. Then he smiled at me, cleared his throat, and began.

I got a finished performance.

And I do mean *finished*.

Standing there in my office, Luther Snodgrass sang as he'd never sung before—he sang *good*.

I couldn't believe my ears.

Out of his mouth came the pear-shaped tones of a trained vocalist. He sounded like a concert artist, and he played the guitar like Segovia.

"There." He put down the guitar. "How'd you like that?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't, for a moment. Then I whispered, "Try something else. Let me hear your old number—*If I Had To Do It All Over Again*—"

So he sang *that*. And it sounded, so help me, wonderful. He was even pronouncing the words so you could understand them.

"Try another," I muttered.

He did a third selection. It was even better. I didn't wait for him to finish but made him stop in mid-chorus.

"What's happened?" I demanded. "What's come over you? Why don't you sing the way you always do?"

"Always *did*," he corrected. "I *can't* sing that way any more. I've been trained."

"By whom?" I snarled, bitterly. Wait until I get my hands on—"

"Mary Jane taught me," Luther said, happily. "Over the week end. From now on, I'm going to be a real singer."

"But how could you change in just one week end? And why can't you change back again?"

"Because she didn't teach me alone." Luther was positively grinning now. "She remembered something Dunn had mentioned."

"Medium Dunn?"

"That's the cat. He said he was also a hypnotist. So she took me to him, and he put me under hypnosis while she coached me. Planted subconscious suggestion, you see? Now I couldn't sing the way I used to, even if I wanted to—"

"Which you don't," I grat-

ed, savagely. "Because you know blessed well that with this new voice I can't possibly use you any more. That I'll have to release you from your contract."

"I only did it because I thought you were the Devil," Luther explained. "I just wanted to save my soul."

"You and your square soul! As far as I'm concerned, you can take it and—"

"Then you won't be needing me any longer?"

"Who needs you?" I swivelled away from him. "Look, I'm a businessman. I'm in the entertainment field and what I want is mediocrity. Fortunately, there's plenty of it around, just as awful as you were, too. I can get myself another boy. So run along. Go back to your Mary Jane. Marry her, settle down, raise six kids and the payments for the mortgage. Sweat out the rest of your days in some lousy factory, rendering chicken-fat."

"Thanks." Luther smiled. "No hard feelings, then?" He moved towards the door, then halted. "Wait until I explain to Mary Jane!" he said. "You know, I almost had *her* con-

vinced you were the Devil, too? I really believed the whole deal about how you had organized to ruin the world with rock-'n-roll and like that. Thanks for relieving my mind."

"Get lost," I said.

Luther Snodgrass went out. Out of the door, out of my hair. I reached up and touched my hair as Judge Harmer came in.

"Well?" he asked.

"You must have heard his voice," I told him. "I can't use anything like that. Send in this new kid—this Randy Studd."

Judge Harmer hesitated.

"You mean you let Luther Snodgrass go? Just like that?"

"Why not? He's got everything figured out. I'm only a no-talent scout, in business for my wealth. No problem."

Judge Harmer nodded and made his exit.

I continued to touch my hair, brushing my hand over my head carefully, so as not to muss my toupee.

That toupee cost \$2,000, but it's worth it.

It hides the horns . . .

THE END

THE GIFT

By RAY BRADBURY

*You can't let a kid down on Christmas,
can you? Not even Out There?*

IT WOULD be Christmas tomorrow, and even while the three of them rode to the rocket port the mother and father were worried. It was the boy's first flight into space, his very first time in a rocket, and they wanted everything to be perfect. So when, at the custom's table, they were forced to leave behind his gift which exceeded the weight limit by no more than a few ounces and the little tree with the lovely white candles, they felt themselves deprived of the season and their love.

The boy was waiting for them in the Terminal room. Walking toward him, after their unsuccessful clash with the Interplanetary officials, the mother and father whispered to each other.

"What shall we do?"

"Nothing, nothing. What can we do?"

"Silly rules!"

"And he so wanted the tree!"

The siren gave a great howl and people pressed forward into the Mars Rocket. The mother and father walked at the very last, their small pale son between them, silent.

"I'll think of something," said the father.

"What . . . ?" asked the boy.

And the rocket took off and they were flung headlong into dark space.

The rocket moved and left fire behind and left Earth behind on which the date was December 24, 2052, heading out into a place where there was no time at all, no month, no year, no hour. They slept

away the rest of the first "day." Near mid-night, by their Earth-time New York watches, the boy awoke and said, "I want to go look out the porthole."

There was only one port, a "window" of immensely thick glass of some size, up on the next deck.

"Not quite yet," said the father. "I'll take you up later."

"I want to see where we are and where we're going."

"I want you to wait for a reason," said the father.

He had been lying awake, turning this way and that, thinking of the abandoned gift, the problem of the season, the lost tree and the white candles. And at last, sitting up, no more than five minutes ago, he believed he had found a plan. He need only carry it out and this journey would be fine and joyous indeed.

"Son," he said, "in exactly one-half hour it will be Christmas."

"Oh," said the mother, dismayed that he had mentioned it. Somehow she had rather hoped that the boy would forget.

The boy's face grew feverish and his lips trembled. "I know, I know. Will I get a

present, will I? Will I have a tree? You promised—"

"Yes, yes, all that, and more," said the father.

The mother started. "But —"

"I mean it," said the father. "I really mean it. All and more, much more. Excuse me, now I'll be back."

He left them for about twenty minutes. When he came back he was smiling. "Almost time."

"Can I hold your watch?" asked the boy, and the watch was handed over and he held it ticking in his fingers as the rest of the hour drifted by in fire and silence and unfelt motion.

"It's Christmas *now*! Christmas! Where's my present?"

"Here we go," said the father and took his boy by the shoulder and led him from the room, down the hall, up a rampway, his wife following.

"I don't understand," she kept saying.

"You will. Here we are," said the father.

They had stopped at the closed door of a large cabin. The father tapped three times and then twice in a code. The door opened and the light in the cabin went out and there was a whisper of voices.

"Go on in, son," said the father.

"It's dark in there."

"I'll hold your hand."

They stepped into the room and the door shut, and the room was very dark indeed. And before them loomed a great glass eye, the porthole, a window four feet high and six feet wide, from which they could look out into space.

The boy gasped.

Behind him, the father and mother gasped with him, and

then in the dark room some people began to sing.

"Merry Christmas, son," said the father.

And the voices in the room sang the old, familiar carols, and the boy moved forward slowly until his face was pressed against the cool glass of the port. And he stood just looking and looking out into space and the deep night at the burning and the burning of ten billion white and lovely candles . . . **THE END**

COMING NEXT MONTH

That master of fantasy, Fritz Leiber, headlines the August issue of FANTASTIC Magazine.



Damnation Morning is a shivery tale of a mysterious woman with a sign upon her forehead, and a man who found that there were two sides to everything! **A. Bertram Chandler** shows you that the tax-collector will make trouble everywhere, even in outer space. His story, *The Idol*, is the subject of the magnificent glowing cover (l.) by **Valigursky**.

To round out another superlative issue is *Man Under Glass*, a fast-paced science-fantasy novelet by a brilliant new writer; and another hilarious dead-pan story by the inimitable **Jack Sharkey**—*Let X Equal Alligator*.

**Plus several other short stories and our regular features—
all on sale July 21 at your newsstand. Better put in your
order now to make sure a copy is saved for you.**

THE FORERUNNER

By ARTHUR PORGES

*Poe once said of a raven, "Prophet
be thou, bird or devil!" And now
here was a creature far stranger
than Poe's poor bird.*

I DON'T remember the exact night it started, probably a Sunday. I think so, because I was worried about getting up Monday morning after a sleepless night.

Now let me admit right here that I don't know much about birds in general, and nothing whatever about the California variety. People here like to pretend the state is unique, but I didn't suspect that even the birds believed it. I always thought they retired early, carrying on most of their activities between dawn and dusk. At least, that's how birds behave back in Illinois.

But Sunday, about eleven at night, I heard the wildest racket in the trees back of my apartment. It seemed as if a whole flock of birds was having a rowdy convention, with

every delegate passionately trying to outscreech all the others. It went on for hours: chirps, twitters, trills, and quasi-human cacklings. I tossed around, swearing fretfully, until dawn, when the meeting finally broke up.

It wouldn't have meant much, except that the next night, right on schedule, they started again. Maddening. I shut all the windows at two, preferring suffocation, but the shrill, raucous sounds sliced through every barrier. I managed to doze off about five, my face buried in the hot pillow, and one arm muffling my right ear.

That morning I met a fellow sufferer at the bus-stop, and we exchanged commiserations. He insisted there was only one bird, but that it was

a prime specimen. Mocking birds, he informed me, often acted like that, and this must be their William Jennings Bryan.

At first, I thought his explanation fantastic. One bird, indeed! More like a mass meeting. But by the end of the week I realized that there were never two notes sounding at once, and that what seemed like a noisy congregation was only a single bird with more endurance than Callas. I soon became sickeningly familiar with every note of that intolerable serenade.

It was almost the same pattern each time, and the soloist simply screamed in a way I'd never heard from any bird before. Every note was charged with emotion, but which one, it was impossible to say. There were times when I felt that the creature was literally insane, and raving. After all, even a lower animal can lose its wits; dogs have been made psychotic; a ghastly penalty for associating with man.

But then I'd conclude that a king size bellyache was the answer—that the bird was in pain. You can't always distinguish pain from pleasure or fear from rage. Take amorous cats, for example. If you didn't know better, you'd

think they loathed the whole business, and were unanimously yearning for an age of artificial insemination. But there's no shortage of kittens in my neighborhood.

The volume this bird had was truly amazing. Something like a parakeet singing through a high powered public address system; and yet with some oddly human tones at times. From midnight until dawn it never let up for even a moment, except to fly off a few hundred feet occasionally, still shrieking.

Now I'm no bird lover; never have been; and being stuck with a Signal Corps pigeon outfit—one of the last—during the war didn't help, although I had to learn a good deal about the temperamental messengers. When addled old ladies talk about exterminating cats on behalf of our feathered friends, it makes me sick. Some birds are more cruel than any cat; take seagulls, for instance. Ever notice how they treat sick or injured animals? But neither do I hate birds. In a mild way I like them; they're pretty and chipper, and sing pleasantly enough—by day.

But this particular one I detested, and with reason. For almost two weeks I got less than three hours' sleep a

night, which is plenty rough when your desk's loaded with detail-work. I tell you, that bird was absolutely frenzied; it kept the whole neighborhood awake, and there appeared to be no remedy.

Many times I heard people in the building across the court swearing savagely in the small hours. Windows were always slamming shut, but it's summer, and soon they'd go up again. Of course, there are always a few who sleep through anything. Not me; I lay there blaspheming, occasionally falling into a fitful doze.

I got to know the song very well, having had good training in music. Few people have what is called perfect pitch; I'm one of them. Although the basic themes never changed, there were remarkable variations. Sometimes the trilling was succeeded by a series of short, jarring whistles; other times a staccato, metallic clucking came next; and frequently almost human yelps of gloating.

There was one rhythmic, heavily accented passage, however, that was the real theme. I quickly memorized it—not willingly, you understand—and could whistle every note right now. It recurred constantly, leit-motif

fashion, and I learned it well without any effort.

Here's a sidelight, an irrelevance about the song, for what it's worth. I'm convinced it has meaning, as you'll see. Anyhow, I dozed off once, and had a vivid dream about the singing. The sky was flushed with pure, pulsing light that tingled, and the air was like a million gardens on a June morning. The song was no longer a nagging torment; but a mighty, triumphant hymn; and in the dream I felt as if tender fingers were loosening the rough, chafing bonds that strangled my spirit. Somewhere a great tower clock struck in flame—it was the Hour, I knew, and rejoiced. When I awoke, there was a woman sobbing in the next apartment. I don't know what all that meant, but the dream is still bright in my memory, and makes me almost sick with a kind of hopeless longing. As if, for a brief moment, I had been someplace, maddeningly near, yet out of reach, where hate, fear, and cruelty are unknown, and things are right.

At the end of two weeks the weird performance was still going on. One silly woman actually phoned the Health Department; someone else

tried the Humane Society, offering the bright suggestion that the bird be painlessly trapped and released elsewhere — Florida, probably. Neither organization was much interested. Night after night, beginning about eleven, and lasting until five, that lone bird sang its fanatic message.

Monday I was trying something new: ear plugs. I hoped they'd do the trick, although there was some danger of missing my alarm at six. I was wrong. The bird had a voice nothing could muffle. After an hour of annoying fullness in my ears, I took the plugs out and hurled them across the room. Then I put the bedlamp on, and got my copy of "Bracebridge Hall," which never fails to soothe. But I couldn't seem to read; I was dead tired, and the grating, insistent noise made it impossible to concentrate. It just didn't seem possible that a mere bird, a few ounces of feathers, could produce such a volume of sound all night with practically no breathing spells. A man's vocal chords would have swelled painfully to silence under half the punishment this hag-ridden creature was inflicting upon itself.

Completely disgusted, I put

out the light again, and lay back, gritting my teeth in a futile paroxysm of resentment.

At that moment I heard a chain-lock rattle, and held my breath. Somehow I knew what was coming. The bird had just begun its hundredth repetition of that leit-motif, and suddenly the emotion made sense; it was exaltation, immense and towering.

Then it happened. There was the crashing thunder of a heavy shotgun, and a brief, agonized squawk. I heard a man's sharp bark of triumph: "Got the son-of-a—, by God!" and the valedictory slam of a door. A woman screamed faintly; lights flashed on in a dozen windows; and there was a swell of intense, low-voiced conversation.

How he hit the bird in the dark, I can't imagine. Probably he aimed up at the sound and let fly with both barrels, trusting to the natural spread of the shot. For that matter, nobody knows, or seems to care, who fired the gun. I expected to hear the prowling car sirens almost immediately, but for some reason the police never came. Apparently everybody within earshot understood what had happened, and being completely in sympathy with the marksman,

saw no point in complaining. Before long, all the lights flicked out, and a grateful silence blanketed the community.

When everything was quiet, I slipped on a jacket, took a small flashlight, and went furtively down the back stairs into the yard. My motivation is still obscure; perhaps I was influenced by that dream; certainly I had no clear notion what might follow.

For some time my search was fruitless. Then, clear in the small circle of light, I saw a patch of eye-catching, startling color.

The great, parrot-like bird lay still, but its unwinking, yellow-irised eyes were menacingly hooded, and a thin, feral hissing came from the wickedly hooked beak. I gazed at my discovery. One hardly expects to find a bird with rainbow plumage and all the earmarks of some exotic origin in a city yard.

It did seem to me, however, that I was getting into something rather disconcerting. It is one thing to administer compassionate first aid to a small songbird, but another matter entirely to tackle a creature the size of a fighting cock, and owning a horny bill powerful enough to pulverize

a marble. For a moment—but no longer—I felt like setting my foot squarely upon that fierce, uncompromising head. But it was merely a fleeting, unworthy thought, born of sleeplessness and irritation.

Instead, I slipped out of my jacket, edged closer, and with a single quick motion, muffled the unwilling patient. It was like holding a bag of angry serpents; the thing fought desperately for its freedom, ripping the lining like paper, but I held fast.

Once back in the apartment, I made a careful examination, finding the only injury to be a broken wing. Thanks to my work with pigeons, I was able to fix it with a splint, although I lost my temper and a bit of thumb in the process of ministering to it.

I fastened the bird by one leg, using a piece of rope, to a heavy table, on which it perched, hissing defiance. Its magnificent plumage brightened the whole dingy little room, and I studied my prize with approval. I had already decided to keep him. What a pet the thing would make when tame and companionable. Kindness and food should do the trick.

"Joseph," I said coaxingly. "Hello, Joseph." Somehow the name seemed inevitable for so

evangelistic a bird with its coat of many colors.

But the golden eyes were implacable, and when I tried to tempt his appetite with fruit and nuts, Joseph merely snapped his great beak warningly without accepting.

It was all the more surprising then, when after a month of armed truce, I heard Joseph actually muttering a few words in English. For some reason I had never associated his parrot-like appearance with the normal talent for mimicry.

Delighted with this development, I tried to teach him some simple phrases, but he just glowered at me with contemptuous, gem-bright eyes, his beak poised for a lightning nip. Only once did he speak again that day, and then he muttered two words I'd never used at all: "hope" and "waiting."

At the end of the second week of fruitless coaching, there was an unusually bright moon, which seemed to agitate Joseph greatly.

And that night my dream returned, stronger than ever. I heard the noble hymn thunder over the horizon. I awoke with a wrenching start to find Joseph shrieking frantically at the very end of his chain. I recognized the leit-motif at

once, and my heart began to pound with a kind of fearful anticipation.

Three times the fanatic theme rang out, unmistakable in its soaring beat. Then, without a pause, and in precisely the same rhythm, the excited bird cried: "He's coming! Coming soon! He's coming!"

Joseph stood tensely erect upon his perch. His massive head was flung back; his magnificent wings were spread wide, their harsh, rich colors cold fire in the moonlight.

"He's coming! Coming soon! He's coming!"

The paean broke in a gasping sob, and the bird shrank to a ruffled ball, wheezing; then he strained upright once more, opening his wings and fighting for breath. The shadow of his quivering form flickered on the walls. I lunged forward, but too late. With a last wailing cry, Joseph toppled and was dead.

It couldn't have been the broken wing, already well mended. It seems to me that death came through a kind of swelling exaltation that shattered the sturdy body as flame splits a granite boulder.

But I wish that Joseph had spoken a few more words.

I'd like to know Who is coming—and when. **THE END**

*You know the old saying, "One man's
kink is another man's straight line"?
Well, our hero didn't. And that
was the trouble with . . .*

THE KINK-REMOVER

By JACK SHARKEY

I TRIED it on a rat, first.

Under the millisecond aberrations of the tiny bulb—the sort one uses in a flashlight—the beady little eyes lost their hot glaze, and the thin, wicked mouth seemed to sag into a flabby simulation of a smile. After a few more moments, the rat was lying on its back, its hairy legs and ugly leather-thongish tail undulating upward in the air, and I seemed to detect a reedy little giggle from its pulsing throat.

Now for the crucial part. I turned off the bulb and waited, pencil poised over notebook. A minute went by. An hour. Three hours. The rat, still giggling inanely, rolled onto its feet again and waddled over to its tank of water at the rear of the cage.

Swiftly, while its back was turned, I stepped to another cage and removed a fledgling sparrow—the natural prey of these vicious rodents; if and when they come across them—from its ventilated box and popped it into the rat cage.

The sparrow kind of shivered a minute, then began to preen itself clumsily—I'd ruffled the skimpy feathers a bit in transporting it—and to flutter about the cage floor.

Then it saw the rat, and gave a sick peep and froze. The rat, hearing the sound, turned about until its eyes fastened upon the other occupant of its cage. On sighting the baby sparrow, it began its waddle again, heading for the sparrow like a clumsy express train.

The feathered newcomer

backed itself into a corner, its eyes bulging and a wheezing whistle seeping out of its gaping beak. The rat reached it, took its round little head between its paws, and, leaning forward with its sharp-toothed muzzle . . . Began to lick the sparrow's face.

"Success!" I fairly shrieked aloud. "All its vicious carnivorous tendencies have been destroyed!"

Inserting my hand into the cage, I separated the two, and removed the sparrow. The rat sighed, and waddled back to its water tank.

The sparrow, on examination, proved to be dead. But this slight disappointment didn't dismay me, since it turned out that the sparrow had died of heart failure. (It couldn't have *known*, after all, that the rat's intentions were amicable.) So I still counted the experiment a success, and noted as much in my lab diary.

"Granny," I said at supper-time, "the years of work and strenuous effort, coupled with many sleepless nights and the bitter scorn of my colleagues, have at last borne fruit."

"Glory be!" said Granny, clasping her withered hands. "Hallelujah! Evildoers have met their Shibboleth!"

She continued in this vein for awhile, then set about serving me my supper. Now and then, from the direction of the stove, I'd hear her ejaculate another "Glory be!" or maybe a sudden "Jehosophat!", while she stirred the soup and poured the coffee for me.

"And what," said kindly old Granny, as she sat across the table from me, "are you going to do with your invention, Athelstane?"

(Athelstane was my name. Athelstane Fritch.)

"I intend to give it—free of charge—to mankind." I said, staring into space with a dedicated look. "Let peace and joy reign forevermore upon this earth."

"You always *were* a good boy, Athelstane," Granny crooned. "I knew you'd been marked down for great things ever since the day you fell down the church steps on your head. It was like a *sign*. You have never been the same, since, you know."

I blushed under this landslide of praise. Granny could be pretty astringent with the superlatives. This gush of glory was balm to my soul.

"Shucks, Granny," I said, lowering my eyes.

"Watch your language Athelstane," said Granny.

The next day, I tried it on a mad dog.

I'd found him foraging in the alley behind the house, his jaws flecked with spume, and his eyes red-speckled and angry. However, I soon had tossed him a porkchop with a stiff dose of barbiturates in it, and had him crammed into a cage in my cellar lab.

What a wonderful specimen *he* was! The hydrophobia had just about run its course in him when I'd found him, but still, as damaged as he was, and as far gone, he soon responded to the indiscernible flicker of the bulb in his cage, and was lying fawning and panting on the cage floor. When I reached in to pet him, he didn't resist or snap, just kind of gurgled down deep in his chest and closed his eyes. Once again, the noble dog was a friend to Man.

However, the bulb could not arrest the ravages of the disease, and soon the noble dog was dead. But he'd died at peace, and so I felt the experiment was still working.

I also checked the rat again. The one dose, the day before, had been enough. He was still waddling, giggling and now and then lying on his back and waving all five extremities in the air. A good sign.

THE KINK-REMOVER

"Granny," I said at supper-time, "I do believe the Kink-Remover's effects are permanent."

"Glory be," said Granny. "What now, Athelstane?"

"Mankind is notorious in his hard-heartedness. If I were to offer to make all men good, some men might try to stop me. Vice-Barons and such, I mean. I might have to do it surreptitiously, Granny."

"No good can come of evil!" said Granny, wringing her hands and rolling her eyes. "I cannot permit it."

"But think of the benefit to mankind," I pleaded.

"It doesn't seem right, Athelstane," said Granny. "Your intent is good, but your method is reprehensible."

"Perhaps I should destroy the Kink-Remover," I said.

Granny's manner softened. "Wait, Athelstane. I shall have to think it over. When I have decided, I will let you know. In the meantime, keep testing."

"Yes, Granny," I said.

I kept testing. My next experimentee was a shrew.

These beasts are small—and rather poisonous if they should bite you—and about the most vicious animals there are, bar none.

But ten seconds under the ray and the shrew was rolling

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about its cage in ecstasy, getting its fur quite filthy in the process. But it was a *friendly* sort of roll.

A zoologist friend of mine lent me a diamondback rattlesnake, which I also exposed to the flicker of the bulb. It coiled itself into a ball and began to hiss in a friendly manner, beating gentle time with its rattles.

In a week, I had a cat, a monkey, a hamster and a porcupine in the same cage with the rat, the shrew and the snake. Instead of fighting, they fondled one another—with a disastrous result between the monkey and porcupine—and I knew my machine was perfected. None of them had had other than the single primal dose of the Kink-Remover. I was willing to bet the effect was a lasting one.

"Granny," I said, as she set down a platter of hot corned beef before me, "there can be no doubt. The Kink-Remover's effects are lasting ones. Have you decided if I may use it or not?"

"Athelstane," said kindly old Granny, "I have decided that you *can* do it. Mere man-made laws should not stand in the way of progress. Make all men good now, repent later."

"Thank you, Granny," I said. "I shall do so tonight.

The world shall soon be another heaven. Yes, another Eden . . ."

"Another Disneyland," said Granny.

It was with a light heart that I set out that night for the powerhouse, my interceptor-box clutched under my arm. It was a fine, warm evening in Spring, and I fairly skipped the distance to the fence that surrounded the vast gray building.

Herein was housed the source of all the lighting in the entire city. Once my interceptor-box was joined to the current . . . Oh Boy!

Perhaps I should take a moment to explain the Kink-Remover. Most basically, it removed kinks.

You see, I had long labored under the theory that evil was a result of malfunctioning synapses in the brain. These tiny electric linkages were setting up behavior-patterns in men, causing them to drink, and swear, and beat their wives, and play Bingo on Sunday. The patterns started forming early in life, beginning in innocent ways. Little girls would take to going without long stockings in summertime, or little boys would skip prayer-meetings because they'd broken a leg, or

something. Little things, but they started the kinks forming.

By the time full growth had been attained, the kinks were "set" in the person's head, with no way of removing them. Until now.

My machine was nothing more than a circuit-breaker. Hooked to an electric power-source, it would interrupt the current at appropriate intervals (intervals too tiny to be observed by the naked eye) and set up a hypno-pattern which would start removing the kinks in the head. Sort of an electronic massage. Like pouring liniment into the brain, in a way. A tiny jolt, a tinier shudder, and all the lifetime-ingrained behavior-patterns were smoothed out, until no trace remained. And you had a new citizen on your hands. Free of all stigma of his (or her) past life. Ready to begin a new career.

It was wonderful, thinking of the sweetness, goodness and just plain sit-and-sigh happiness that would soon be blossoming throughout the city. Once my interceptor-box was attached, anyhow.

And then, all over town, lights would flicker, soothe, unkink, and— The thought was too rapturous to bear.

THE KINK-REMOVER

I hastened into the City Powerhouse.

There was a man, a sort of guard, at a desk.

"Whadda *you* want?" he snarled.

"I bring good tidings!" I exclaimed. "I have come to save our city from evil!"

He seemed impressed. "Ya don't say!" he mumbled, reaching toward the handle of his pistol, where it protruded from a leather holster.

I got all choked up. Here he was, about to show me his heart was with the Cause, by possibly beating his gun into a plowshare, or something. Tears came to my eyes.

And then, suddenly, he was pointing the gun at me.

"Easy, buddy," he said, in a gentle voice, his free hand reaching for the phone. "Everything's sure gonna be okay."

"Heavens!" I said. "A minion of Satan . . . in the *City Powerhouse!*"

"Huh?" said the man.

"I had no idea," I explained, "that impish infiltration was so complete."

"Oh . . . Yeah, sure, buddy, sure," he said, reaching for that phone again.

I dared not linger.

Most foresightedly, I had attached a few dry cells to my interceptor-box, with a tiny

bulb. I activated it at once. It gleamed at his eyes.

His hand stopped short of the phone, and suddenly he smiled. "Life," he said, "is just a bowl of cherries."

"Right!" I said, and hurried off down the hall.

Behind me, I could hear him; his voice roaring like an old-time evangelist's, saying, "Evil is no good! Evil is bad for you! Down with evil!"

Well, I sighed, it was a start. Soon the whole city would be as he was. It was a prospect the mind could hardly contemplate without a tremor of joy.

I hurried into the main power room, where the whine of the dynamos was deafening. The overpowering, giddy-scent of ozone was flooding my nostrils and lungs, but I plunged to my task, hiding the box on a high metal flange of one of the air-conditioning ducts—where the Vice-Barons couldn't find it in time—and began splicing wires like mad.

And all at once, all the lights went out.

I detected the cause immediately. The guard, in his holy zeal, was busily unhooking the generators and dynamos. His voice floated up to me where I stood on the ladder beside the horizontal flange.

"Electricity is evil. *Sunlight* is the natural way! Down with man-made light!"

H'mm . . . This was an effect I hadn't counted on. But, luckily, it played right into my hands.

The Vice-Barons would undo *themselves*! The irony of the thing was delicious. I would hook up the box, hurry home, and soon, someone would come to investigate the cause of the city-wide darkness, and turn the current back on.

And when they did— Oh Boy!

It was a bit difficult finding my way back to the house, what with the street lights all cold and dark on their poles, but there was a sliver of moon to light my way.

Soon I was safely back inside my front hall.

"Is that you, Athelstane?" said kindly old Granny.

"Yes, Granny," I said, going into the living room. I could just make out her wizened little form, in its black shawl, oscillating away in her rocker.

"Athelstane, dear," she said, in her sweet little voice, "I have gone blind. But do not fear. This was meant to be."

"Hush, Granny," said I. "You have not gone blind. The

City Light and Power has gone temporarily out of whack. That is all. Soon the light will have returned."

"Glory be," said kindly old Granny, adding for emphasis, "Hallelujah."

I left her there and hurried down to the cellar to check the animals once more, by match-light. Like the various birds and quadrupeds in that painting, "The Peaceable Kingdom," they were all huddled together in their common cage, without so much as a muted growl to show that they'd reverted to their normal viciousness. I sighed in contentment.

Then the lights came on.

The animals stirred, and began to rouse themselves from their half-slumber. I proceeded to check some of the other cages in the lab.

I had two lovebirds there—not strictly lab-animals, more like pets—which I looked in on. A funny cold finger coiled about my heart as I noticed something slightly amiss. They were at opposite ends of their cage, kicking birdseed at each other. And they were snarling.

"Horrors!" I said aloud. "The Kink-Remover! It is *too*

perfect. Not only does it remove the evil synapses from Vice-Barons and their ilk, it removes the *good* synapses from even lovebirds!"

And then I had a worse thought. *I* was being exposed to the glow of the bulbs in the ceiling. At any moment should not *I*, with my near-perfect goodness, turn into a monster?

With quick presence of mind, I switched off the lights. Luckily, though the lovebirds had been affected, it took a bit longer on larger animals (like myself), so I felt that time yet remained to rectify things. On my way upstairs, I stumbled on the steps and cursed. From *me*, this was a *terrible* change. I prayed I'd get to the powerhouse on time.

"Granny," I said, dashing into the living room. "Turn out the lights, quickly!"

But Granny was not there.

From behind me came a sullen growl. I turned, and there was kindly old Granny, clutching the meat cleaver, and smiling in a disconcertingly intent manner.

"Granny," I said sternly, "you're off your rocker!"

"Glory be!" said Granny. Then she swung the cleaver.

THE END

THE KEY

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Many writers have tried to answer the question: What is our Galaxy? Here is an answer that will first shock you, then horrify you, then repel you—then make you think.

THERE'S a key.

Man has been hunting for it ever since Man *was* Man. That curiosity, I suppose, is a trait inherited from our simian ancestors. Had our forebears been of canine or of feline stock it is probable that we should not be spending so much of our time asking, *Why?* Dogs and cats are not of an enquiring nature, unless food is involved. Monkeys are. But if our ancestors had been dogs or cats we should not be Men, not in the true sense of the word, and our intellectual energies would be directed only towards the more efficient production of food and shelter, and it is highly probable that we should never have left the surface of our own planet.

But we *are* Men, close cousins

to the monkeys, and we did leave the surface of Earth, and that is how I came to be drinking in *Susie's Bar and Grill* in Port Forlorn, on Lorn, most dismal of the Rim Worlds, that night, and that is how Halvorsen came to find me there.

I'll say this for Halvorsen; he didn't look like a monkey's cousin. He looked like a monkey. He didn't need to put his hands over his eyes or his ears or his mouth to look like one of the three wise monkeys, however. He looked like a smallish, gray ape that has lived long enough to achieve and, even, to surpass human intelligence. He was skinny, but carried a pronounced pot belly. His dark, wizened face was framed by bushy gray side whiskers, and from it



"Halvorsen didn't look like a monkey's cousin—
he looked like a monkey."

stared two large, mournful, brown eyes.

I felt those eyes staring at me. I felt them for seconds before I lifted my head from my arms and looked into them, across the table with its filled-to-overflowing ashtrays, its dirty glasses, its little, stagnant pools of spilled drinks.

I was in no mood for company. That was why my friends—Second and Third Mates of the *Rimhound*, their girls and my girl—had left me. I was feeling disgusted with everything and everybody, including myself, and the more that I drank the more disgusted I was feeling.

"Go away," I said to Halvorsen. "Go away. I don't know what you're selling, but I don't want any today, thank you. Not today. Not ever."

"How do you know?" he countered.

"Because I know everything," I replied. "Liquor makes me that way. I know that the Universe is just a cesspit and the stars and planets no more than ordure . . ."

He said, "I want to know everything."

"I've told you everything there is to know," I said.

He smiled sadly, pulled out a chair and sat down. He lift-

ed a hand in oddly imperious gesture. Susie herself waddled over to our table, took his order. She returned with a bottle of imported whiskey—not the real Scotch, but that distilled on Nova Caledon is close enough—and a couple of clean glasses, set them down before us and smiled fatly. She treated the little monkey, as I was regarding him, with a deference that I found annoying.

Halvorsen poured each of us a drink. He raised his glass and said, "To the key . . ." He drank, and I drank.

"What key?" I asked.

"The key that I am looking for," he replied.

"I haven't got it," I said.

"You can help me to find it," he told me.

"What the hell is all this about?" I demanded.

He said, making a statement rather than asking a question, "You're Charles Merrill, aren't you?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"You hold a Master Astronaut's Certificate of Competency. You were, until recently, Second Officer of the *Rimbird*. Prior to that you were with the Trans Galactic Clippers . . ."

"So," I cracked brilliantly, "what?"

"So I need a Master Astro-

naut. I'm willing to pay handsomely for your services."

"Listen," I said, "I've had Space. I've had Space in a big way. I'm sick of tank-grown food and recirculated air and water. When I paid off from the *Rimbird* I swore that I'd never set foot in a spaceship again, and I meant it."

"Times have changed since then," he remarked. "You paid off from the *Rimbird* to get married, to find yourself a shore job. But the girl didn't marry you, and so you never got that sinecure in her father's business. You're polishing an office stool with the seat of your pants and hating it. You come in here every Friday night to get a load on and to swap stories with your old shipmates."

It was true, but nobody likes being told the truth. I was tempted to let him have what remained in my glass full in the face, but thought better of it. Fat Susie was watching us, and Susie, for some reason, had always been willing to give me credit. Susie, I had observed over the past few months, deplored rowdiness in her establishment and did her utmost to discourage it. I decided that I did not want to get in Susie's bad books.

"And who the hell are *you*, anyhow?" I asked him.

"My name is Halvorsen," he said quietly.

"Never heard of you," I grunted. "Not that I particularly want to."

He smiled, and looked more like a sad little monkey than ever. "Such is fame," he sighed. "You must have seen my name every day of your life, Mr. Merrill — aboard your ships, on every civilized planet."

"Sorry," I said insincerely, "it rings no bell." I got to my feet. "Excuse me. I want to shake hands with an old friend."

Halvorsen looked at me inquiringly when I came back.

"So," I sneered as I sat down, "you're *that* Halvorsen. Halvorsen, the Outhouse King, sitting on his throne of vitrified porcelain . . ."

He flushed. He said, "I'm a rich man, Mr. Merrill, but how I made my money is of no importance, except that it was made honestly. I'm a rich man, and I pay well. At the moment, I need a yacht-master. Levin, who was my captain, got himself knocked down by a ground car on the day after we arrived here and will be in hospital for months yet."

"I've had Space," I told him

again, "in a big way. In any case, I've no desire to become a hired hand, a . . . a *flunkey*."

"If you take the job," he assured me, "you'll be no more a flunkey than my secretary, or my physician."

"You can call me Admiral," I said, "with pay and uniform to match, and I'll still not be interested. Take my tip and go to see old Grimes, the Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners. He may be able to loan you an officer."

"I've already seen Commodore Grimes," said Halvorsen. "He told me that he's very short of officers at the moment, and that all his officers are under contract and can't be released. He told me about you, and the places where I'd be likely to find you on a Friday night."

"So he told you about me," I growled. "What did he tell you? 'One of our most promising young officers, who threw away his career for a floosie?' Or did he say that I was a no-hoper and no loss to Rim Runners?"

"He said," replied Halvorsen, "that you were a good man gone wrong, and that you were in crying need of rehabilitation."

"You can take your rehabilitation," I started to say, "and . . ."

It was the look of contempt in the girl's eyes that stopped me. She had come in without my noticing her and was now standing behind Halvorsen. If he was a monkey, she was a cat. She had the slim sleekness of the well-bred Siamese, and something of the same coloring, and her blue eyes held only feline disdain. *Who is this drunken bum?* she seemed to ask, although her wide, scarlet mouth did not move.

Halvorsen saw me staring at her, half-turned in his chair.

"Leona," he said, his face lighting up. He sprang to his feet. Clumsily, unwillingly, I followed suit. "Mr. Merrill, I'd like you to meet my secretary, Miss Leona Wayne. Leona, this is Mr. Merrill, whom I hope to persuade to take Captain Levin's place."

She acknowledged the introduction and heard the news without enthusiasm.

"*Starmaid* runs herself, Mr. Halvorsen," she stated coldly. "Even I can handle her."

"Can you handle an emergency?" I asked her.

"Can *you*?" she countered.

"That's my job," I said.

Halvorsen bustled off and brought back a chair from another table. He fussed around

Leona as she sat down. I resumed my own seat. All the time the girl's cold eyes were fixed on mine. Already I was beginning to hate her—the coolness of her, the sleekness, the plain, expensive clothing that achieved effect by cut rather than by ornamentation, the slender elegance of the body that was its foundation.

"I've heard about these ships that run themselves," I said. "Lloyd's of London won't touch them with a barge pole, and Federation astronomical law insists that at least one Master Astronaut be carried lest they became a menace to decent commercial shipping."

"One needn't insure with Lloyd's," she said. "We don't deal with them."

"You still have to observe Federation law," I told her. "Even here. Even on The Rim."

"A pity," she said.

"How soon can you join?" asked Halvorsen, breaking into the *tete-a-tete*.

"I haven't said that I am joining," I said.

"Don't press him," said the girl.

"I should give a month's notice to my present employers," I said.

"I," Halvorsen assured me, "am not without influence. Can you join tonight? We can

get your name on the Register tomorrow."

"What's the job worth?" I asked, hoping to deepen the expression of disgust on the girl's face. My hope was realized.

Halvorsen told me. He named a figure that would have made the Master of an *Alpha Class* liner envious. He promised free transportation, First Class, to any part of the Galaxy on the termination of my employment and my reinstatement, if I so desired, in T. G. Clippers. More for the hell of it than anything else I pressed for a uniform allowance over and above my handsome salary. Halvorsen did not quibble. His secretary looked as though she would be paying for everything out of her own pocket.

We left *Susie's Bar and Grill* shortly thereafter. Big, fat Susie bowed us to the door, treating Halvorsen as though he were royalty—as, in a sense, he was. Did not every human and humanoid in the Galaxy pay him tribute at least once daily? There was a chauffeur-driven hired car waiting outside, its gyroscope humming softly. The driver opened the door of the passenger cabin with a flourish. Leona Wayne climbed first

into the monowheel; I stood back to let Halvorsen follow her, but he urged me to take precedence. I sat down beside the girl. She edged away from me. At once I was acutely conscious of my shabby clothing, my long unpolished shoes, the fact that I had let three days go by without using depilatory cream.

Halvorsen seated himself on the other side of me.

"Where to, Mr. Halvorsen?" asked the driver.

"The spaceport," answered my new employer.

We skimmed through the narrow streets of the Pleasure Quarter, through the bright, meretricious glare of neon signs, through the waves of trite, tawdry music that billowed out through the open doors of bars and night clubs. Then we were among the warehouses, black cliffs that towered up, on either hand, to the black sky. The few sparse lights served only to accentuate their blackness, as did the faint, far nebulosities in the empty, Rim World firmament, glimpsed now and again from the bottom of our man-made canyon. Old newspapers, driving before the omnipresent bitter wind, gleamed in the beam of our headlamp like soiled, white birds.

Ahead of us, growing brighter, was the harsh brilliance of working lights, the spaceport.

We swept through the gate after only cursory formalities. We passed the gleaming tower that was *Rimhound*, loading for Ultimo, Thule and Faraway. We rolled past the berth in which *Rimbird* was discharging the merchandise she had loaded on the Eastern Circuit—Stree, Mellise, Tharn and Grollor. We left behind us the whining, snarling machinery, the busy conveyor belts, cranes and gantries. We ran out to an almost unused corner of the field, threading our way through and among towering piles of junk.

My first impression of *Starmaid* was of smallness. She was dwarfed by an upended tube liner—one of those from the Trans Galactic Clipper *Thermopylae*, left at Port Forlorn after she had put in for repairs—was hardly bigger than an almost porous propellant tank discarded from some other ship.

My second impression was of cleanliness and of neatness. *Starmaid* would have looked neat and clean in any surroundings, but she lost nothing by contrast with the interstellar junk with which she was surrounded. I realized

that I had lived for too long without love, and that this little ship would do much to fill the emotional vacuum.

We got out of the car, stepped down to the dirty, scarred concrete. Halvorsen walked briskly to the airlock door, fussed with the combination lock. There was about him the air, outrageously incongruous, of the suburban householder returning home after a party. He got the door open, stood to one side. Leona Wayne went to enter, but he put out a restraining hand.

He said, "This is only a little ship, but I like to observe naval etiquette. The Master takes precedence over the Purser when boarding."

"And over the Owner?" I asked.

"Over the Bio-Chemist," he replied. "There are no idlers aboard *Starmaid*. After you, Captain Merrill."

"Thank you." I replied.

I walked first into the little-airlock, hardly larger than a telephone booth, ignoring the venomous glance that Leona Wayne shot in my direction. Once inside the ship I insisted that Halvorsen take the lead—after all, he knew his way around; I didn't. The drive had sobered me up and I was able to take an intelligent interest in all that I saw.

She was more than just a little ship. She was a big ship—and a big ship of the better class, at that—in miniature. She had everything, including gear that was still too expensive to be built into the T. G. Clippers or the Commission's liners. There was, for example, a set of remote controls so that the Mannschenn Drive unit could be operated from the Reaction engine room, and another allowing the rockets to be controlled from the Interstellar Drive compartment. (This, however, was necessary, since *Starmaid* carried only one Engineer, he being qualified to take charge of both propulsive systems.) The galley, Leona Wayne's domain (she was Catering Officer as well as Purser) was a gleaming miracle of automation. There was automatic monitoring for the yeast and tissue culture vats and the hydroponics tanks—but this, Halvorsen confessed, was usually disconnected as he enjoyed pottering.

We went up to the Control Room before we inspected the accommodation. This was in keeping with the rest of the ship. There were such luxuries as Mass Proximity Indicators, usually found only in the Survey Fleet. There was

a Mark VII Geigenheim Electronic Navigator—and this, I knew, would be capable of taking *Starmaid* from one side of the Galaxy to the other. I resolved to do the same as Halvorsen had done with his electronic monitors. The Geigenheim made the ship intelligent—but she still had no imagination, and it is imagination alone that keeps Man superior to the thinking machines of his own making. It wasn't all mechanical.

We looked into the Radio Office. I was rather surprised to see that there was no dividing line drawn between electronic and psionic radio—the dog's brain amplifier was out of place among the severely utilitarian transceivers and radar gear. Halvorsen explained that there had been more doubling up, that his Communications Officer was one of those rare people who, in addition to their-telepathic talents, have the ability to comprehend and to cope with electronic equipment. It was clear that nothing but the best was good enough for my new employer. I began to feel acutely conscious of my own shortcomings and began to wonder what was the urgency, why he could not wait for the recovery of Captain Levin who, to judge by the standards

of his shipmates, must have been an outstanding astronaut.

I raised the point a little later when the three of us were sitting in the small, beautifully furnished saloon, drinking the excellent coffee that Leona had made.

"I'm an old man, Captain Merrill," said Halvorsen. "I'm an old man, and beginning to get impatient. There's so much that I want to know before I go . . ."

"Is it that key you're looking for?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm looking for the key. I want to find out, if I can, if there's any meaning to the Universe, any meaning to life. I've already spent a fortune hiring other men's brains; they've come up with all sorts of fancy variations of the Unified Field Theory, but not one of them makes any real sense . . ."

"The Halvorsen Foundation . . ." I said. "I should have remembered."

"Yes. The Halvorsen Foundation, set up to discover what we are, *why* we are. I'm tired of waiting for the scientists to cook up any sort of intelligible answer and so I decided to find out for myself. I thought that I might find the key out here on the Rim, out here where our expanding, explod-

ing Galaxy is pressing against the ultimate nothingness . . .”

“But what *are* you looking for?” I asked.

He hesitated before replying. He asked, “Are you a religious man?”

“No,” I said truthfully.

“Then you have an open mind, presumably. I hope so—although I have found atheists to be as savagely intolerant as deists. But if you’re an agnostic . . .”

“I am,” I interrupted.

“Good. I’ve become rather hesitant about mentioning my current line of research before strangers. The deists accuse me of blasphemy, of impious prying into secrets that were never meant to be revealed; the atheists accuse me of trying to bolster up archaic superstitions. Be that as it may, what I’m investigating is the continuous creation of matter. It was Hoyle, a Twentieth Century astronomer, who first stumbled onto it, who put forward the theory that there was a continual influx of new hydrogen atoms into the Universe from . . . from *somewhere*. Hydrogen atoms, the very building blocks of all matter. The theory was never disproved and in Hoyle’s time, when the average scientist tended to be something of a

mystic, was quite widely accepted. But mysticism is frowned upon now and Hoyle’s theory of continuous creation has been explained away. The Galaxy is expanding, they tell us, and as all Space is filled with hydrogen atoms it is only natural that there should be an apparent influx.

“That explanation never satisfied me. I had *Starmaid* built to my own specifications, recruited her crew. I brought her out to the Rim. I ran out past the Rim, beyond the Rim—fifty light years, a hundred, two hundred, a thousand . . .”

“It seemed like a thousand years,” said the girl. “Years, not light years . . . They complain of the cold and the dark on these Rim Worlds; they don’t know what the words mean.”

“There was emptiness,” said Halvorsen, “an emptiness far beyond anything found in interstellar space. I doubt if there was one atom to a million cubic miles, and my Mass Proximity Indicator is fantastically sensitive. It was obvious that the hydrogen atoms aren’t being swept in from Outside, equally obvious that this continuous creation is a phenomenon confined to the Galaxy—and, it could be, to the other Galaxies . . .”

"What do you hope to find?" I asked. "And where do you hope to find it?"

"There is one answer to both questions," he said. "I don't know. But I have heard of the philosophical lizards of Stree, and it may be that they will be able to give me some clue. I want to leave for Stree tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"The ship is fully stored and bunkered, *Captain Merrill*," said the girl. "All that is required is the legal formality of placing your name on the Register. If you've forgotten all you ever knew of pilotage and navigation it doesn't matter; as I've already told you, the ship can handle herself if need be."

"I've not forgotten," I said sharply. I turned to Halvorsen. "There are things that have to be checked, sir. There are my own personal affairs to wind up . . ."

"You can be ready by tomorrow evening," he told me.

"*This evening*," said Leona Wayne, looking at her watch.

"*This evening*," amended Halvorsen.

I was.

I was ready, and *Starmaid* was ready, and we lifted from Port Forlorn at precisely 1900 hours, Local Time. It had been

a rush getting all secured for Space. There were the legal formalities—and didn't somebody once remark that the tide runs sluggishly through official channels? There were my own private affairs to be clewed up, and there was the thorough inspection of the ship and all her gear that I insisted upon before I would take over.

The most important event of the day, I think, was the visit to Captain Levin in the Port Forlorn hospital. He was not the man that I had expected to find; I had visualized somebody much older, somebody with the manner and appearance of a senior master in the Trans Galactic Clippers or the Interstellar Transport Commission. He was a young man, hardly older than myself. He was frankly envious of me, and he was willing to talk.

"They're a good crowd," he told me. "Leona's only fault is her damned snootiness, her refusal to make allowances for human frailties. But she's a good cook and a good Purser, and she can navigate as well as you or I. The Old Boy's harmless enough—and I'd always be willing to sign him on as Bio-Chemist if he lost his fortune and had to work for a living again. Doc Rayner is pretty harmless—the only

trouble with *him* is that he's too engrossed in keeping Halvorsen alive and kicking to worry much about us lesser mortals. He's a geriatrician, of course, one of *the* geriatricians, so anybody on the sunny side of seventy isn't of much interest to him. Then there's Cressy. If he isn't thinking about electronics he's thinking about psionics, and if he isn't thinking about either he's thinking about both. Leave him to his printed circuits and his dog's brain in aspic and he's quite happy. MacIlwraith can be hard to get on with. He's one of those engineers with the odd idea that the ship exists only to house her precious machinery. He'll always do what you want, though, even if he's apt to run screaming to Halvorsen about it afterwards . . ."

I met them all during the day. Rayner looked as though he himself were in crying need of the services of a geriatrician. He looked older than his patient, was no more than a perambulatory assemblage of brittle bones held together by dried skin and sinew. Cressy was only a youngster—the sort of youngster who wears pebble-lensed spectacles and has become a junior chess champion long before the onset of puberty. MacIlwraith

was a hulking, carrot-topped brute who must have had Neanderthalers in his ancestry. He made it clear to me from the start that I was only a Control Room ornament and inessential to the real work of the ship. He took orders, however, albeit grudgingly. He would have been far happier if those orders had come directly from the Owner and not from a mere Master, such as I represented.

This, then, was my crew. This was the crew of the sweet, shining *Starmaid*. This was the little company that was dedicated to the search for . . . for *something* in the realms of the eternal *nothing*. I was dedicated to the same search, even though I knew that it was crazy. A man will do a lot for money. A man will do a lot—let us admit it—for the chance to get back into Space again.

At 1900 hours we lifted. At 1845 I was sitting in my acceleration chair in Control, looking out through the wide viewports. There was little to see—a chill drizzle had swept down from the hills to enshroud Port Forlorn. Dimly I could make out the glare of the working lights around *Rimbird* and *Rimhound*, the fainter glow of the city a little

beyond them. Overhead the sky was overcast.

Halvorsen was in the special chair that he had caused to be installed in *Starmaid's* control room—it was well to one side and out of the way. Leona Wayne was sitting in the Navigator's chair. This was the first ship in which I had served in which the purser was interested in navigation; but there has to be, I told myself, a first time for anything.

She handled the pre-blast-off exchanges with the Control Tower competently enough, made the routine checks without hesitation. I could not fault her counting down.

"Zero!" she said at last.

Starmaid lifted, obedient to my fingers on the controls. She lifted, and the glare of her exhaust was reflected from the clouds through which we drove. She lifted, but slowly—I was remembering the old, brittle bones of Halvorsen, my employer, the old, brittle bones of Rayner, the Surgeon. Too, *Starmaid* was not a commercial ship; there was no need for me to conserve reaction mass by getting upstairs in as big a hurry as the structural members would stand. She lifted, and with every mile of gained altitude I

was getting the feel of her. By the time that we were clear of the overcast I was beginning to think that I was her Master in fact as well as in name.

Halvorsen smiled at me, saying, "She's a sweet little ship."

"I'm finding that out," I replied.

"She is also," remarked Leona Wayne coldly, "a tough ship. She doesn't need to be babied."

I swallowed the hot retort, returning my attention to the instruments. If there had to be ill feeling, I would not be its initiator. I made sure that the needle of the accelerometer stayed steadily on the Half G graduation, affected a great show of interest in the skin temperature gauges. I was conscious all the time of the girl's cold eyes on my every action. I wondered if my predecessor had had to put up with this tacit back-seat driving.

Lorn was no more than a great, misty ball below us. Ahead was the blackness, with the sparse pinpoints of light that were stars, of Outer Space; out to starboard was the glowing lens of the Galaxy. I cut the Drive, letting *Starmaid's* momentum carry her up and out. I actuated the gyroscopes, watched the cart-

wheel sight in the very nose of the ship swing slowly towards the glowing, orange speck that was the sun around which Stree revolved.

Dimly I was aware of a slender hand holding a sheet of paper before my nose. Irritated, I snapped, "What is it?"

"The coordinates of our trajectory," replied Leona Wayne. "I fed the data into the Geigenheim while you were so busy piloting."

"Thanks," I said, "but I'll not be needing the Geigenheim for this run. It's no more than the shortest distance between two points with nothing in the way..."

"How do you know there's not?" she demanded.

"Miss Wayne," I growled, "I've been on the Eastern Circuit for over eighteen months. There's not so much as a swarm of micro-meteorites between Lorn and Stree."

I juggled with the gyroscope controls, put the orange star in the exact center of the sights, held it there. I sounded the acceleration alarm, fired all tubes. I let the speed build up gradually, never exceeding one gravity acceleration. Lorn was well astern when I cut the rockets and ordered the Mannschenn Drive started.

The journey from Lorn to

Stree is not a long one, in terms of subjective time—the direct journey, that is; it's long enough when you have stoppages for loading and discharge on Tharn, Grollor and Mellise, with the consequent detours. It wasn't a long voyage for *Starmaid*. It was hardly long enough for me to get to know my new shipmates properly—and *Starmaid* was a ship in which all hands tended to do their own jobs quietly and efficiently with little inclination for social intercourse.

When he was not busy with his not very onerous duties as Bio-Chemist old Halvorsen shut himself in his cabin, studying the tapes that he had bought on Lorn concerning Stree. MacIlwraith, the Engineer, lived for and with his smoothly functioning machinery. Cressy spent all his time telepathically nattering with his colleagues in other ships and shore stations throughout the Galaxy. Old Doctor Rayner had little enough to do, but he sought nobody's company and seemed happy enough cataloging his stamp collection.

Then, of course, there was Leona. Her hobby—if hobby it could be called—was the pursuit and the destruction of

dirt. Her galley was spotless, as were her storerooms. Her little office was almost impossibly tidy. The small public rooms gleamed from deck to deckhead. With this I had no fault to find—but when, one day, I came into the Control Room to make a routine check of her position and found her dusting and polishing I decided that it was time to draw a line.

"Please," I said, "leave the Control Room alone." I pulled myself across to the navigator's desk, which had been cleared of all books and papers. "Where is my work book? Where are the tables and the ephemerae?"

"In the drawers where they belong," she replied shortly.

"Miss Wayne," I told her, "I appreciate what you've done in here. Really I do," I went on, lying diplomatically. "But I'm an untidy man, and I know it, and I have my own filing system. When things are left *my* way I can find anything I want in a split micro-second. Now . . ."

"And now you can't, I suppose!" she flared. "Captain Merrill, I don't see how you can live and work in such filth!"

"Filth?" I asked mildly. "Isn't that rather a strong

word? Absurdly strong? After all, there's clean dirt and dirty dirt, and a slight untidiness can hardly be classed as either . . ."

"A slight untidiness? And what about the cigarette ash over everything? What about that?"

"It does no harm. It has occurred to me, though, that our employer could devote his time and his genius to inventing a really efficient Free Fall ash-tray . . ."

"So now," she accused me, "you're sneering at Mr. Halvorsen, the man who picked you up off the beach and gave you a job . . ."

"I had a job at the time," I reminded her. "I have nothing against Mr. Halvorsen—but, after all, I was doing him the favor, not the other way round."

"That," she said, "doesn't give you the right to turn this ship into a pigsty."

"Get this straight," I told her, "the only person in a ship in Deep Space who has any rights is the Master—even the Master of a yacht, even when the Owner's aboard. The Master has the right to keep his Control Room in whatever condition of untidiness he pleases. I am exercising that right now. Will you please leave, Miss Wayne, and take

your polishing rags with you?"

I didn't think that it was an excessively harsh reprimand—after all, I'd often heard far harsher ones delivered by irate Masters to female members of their crews. After all, when women come into Deep Space, with the rank and pay of spacemen, they must expect to take the rough with the smooth. I was rather congratulating myself for not having flown off the handle properly, was pulling books and papers from the drawers and sliding them under the elastic webbing of the table in my usual untidy manner, when I heard a sniffing sound.

I looked around. I was surprised and shocked to see that Leona Wayne, the icily calm, efficient Miss Wayne, was sobbing.

Damn it all, I thought, she's the Purser. She can't expect to be handled as though she's labeled *Fragile* top, sides and bottom. She's trodden on my corns, and she's had her corns trodden on in return, and so what?

"Miss Wayne," I heard myself saying, "if I said anything to upset you, I apologize . . ."

"It's not what you've said, you stupid brute!" she wailed. "It's what you've done. This

was such a nice, clean, *tidy* ship before you came here. And now . . ."

Somehow, I was holding her, and she was sniffing damply between my neck and my shoulder. I remember what little I had seen of Levin, the slight aura of effeminacy that had hung around him—not that he was any worse a spaceman for that. I thought of the old-maidish MacIlwraith and the equally old-maidish Rayner—and, come to that, old Halvorsen had a certain prissiness about him . . . And there was Cressy, with his love of gossip—even if it was intra-Galactic gossip . . . And when I joined the ship I had sensed, subconsciously, that all those in her were house-proud rather than ship-proud. (And yet Leona had taken care to impress upon me that *Starmaid* was a tough ship . . .)

So she didn't like dirt and untidiness, and she had shipped away in a yacht full of fussy, old-maidish bachelors, and then I'd come, with my slovenly habits, and had assumed the role of the proverbial bull in the china shop, the serpent in a hitherto gleaming and spotless Eden. It was just too bad, and I had no intention of promising to

mend my ways. (I might try to mend them, but that would depend to a large extent upon the outcome of events. I raised her tear-stained face and I kissed her, and thought that I might, perhaps, try to keep my desk a little tidier and to dispose of my cigarette ash in the receptacles provided . . .)

She said, "But you must remember, Charles, you must try to remember how much I hate dirt and untidiness. It's almost a phobia with me. That's why I agreed to come away in this yacht when all the other secretaries, senior to me, had turned the chance down. Space is so *clean* . . ."

I said that I'd try to remember—and it wasn't a case of anything for a quiet life either. I had realized suddenly that I'd wanted the girl ever since my first sight of her.

The others accepted the situation philosophically enough. I was half afraid that there would be jealousies and resentments, but I need not have worried on that score. I don't think that any of them was interested, even. Each had his own interests, and sex was not among them. His engines were MacIlwraith's shining mistresses, and so long as Cressy could indulge in his neighborly, back-fence gossip

with other telepaths, *he* was happy. The Doctor had his stamp collection, and the only female in old Halvorsen's life was that naked Truth who, in the old legends, was alleged to live at the bottom of a well.

(And how close to the actuality those old legends were, we had no idea!)

As for me—I was lucky, and I knew it. I had a ship and I had a woman, and what more can a man ask? True, the woman was over-insistent upon cleanliness and tidiness, but that was a small fault. I could endure that for the sake of all the rest. And after all—until men are capable of building the perfect ship what right have they to expect the perfect woman?

And so, as the subjective days passed, we fell towards Stree. Both Leona and I were sorry when my observations showed me that it was time to return to the normal continuum, time to throw ourselves into an orbit around the planet and to maneuver the ship into her landing spiral.

But there was Stree below us—an ochreous ball, mainly barren rock and desert. There were the signals coming in, loud and clear, from the beacon at Port Grimes. There was the sibilant voice of Stressor,

the Rim Runners' Agent, saying, "*Starmaid*, your request received. You may land."

We came in, dropping through the clear, arid atmosphere, dropping down to the expanse of arid sand that was the spaceport. We came in, with *Starmaid* obedient to my hand on the controls, with Leona sitting at my side and refraining, now, from back-seat driving, with old Halvorsen beaming at us like a benevolent, wise old monkey. We came in slowly, balancing atop the pillar of fire that was our interplanetary drive, falling gently to the circle of fused slag that showed where the backblasts of *Faraway Quest*, of *Lorn Lady*, of *Rimbird*, *Rimhound*, *Rimfire* and *Jolly Swagman* had splashed and spread over the surface.

We landed gently, softly. I cut the drive, pressed the switch that would make the *Finished with Engines* signal in the engine room.

"We're here," I said, unnecessarily.

I looked through the viewport. I saw Stressor hurrying out of the Port Master's office, looking, from this distance, like one of the dinosaurs that were once the dominant life form on at least a thousand worlds, that would still be the dominant life form if they had

learned to adapt themselves, as had Stressor's ancestors.

"What—I mean *who*—is that?" asked Halvorsen.

"That's Stressor," I said. "You heard his voice on the R/T when we asked permission to land. He's Rim Runners' local agent."

"You're familiar with these people, Captain Merrill," said Halvorsen. "I'll leave it to you to do the honors."

"As you please, Mr. Halvorsen," I replied. Then, to Leona, "You'd better put the kettle on. The Streen love a friendly chat over the teacups."

I went down to the airlock. Stressor was surprised to see me. He clasped my hand in both of his, the rough scales bruising my skin.

"Mr. Merrill—or should I say Captain Merrill? This is indeed a pleasure! I was told that you had left the service."

"I had," I said. "But I came back. Welcome aboard, Stressor. Will you join us for tea?"

"You are gracious."

He got through our little airlock with some difficulty, followed me up to the saloon. I introduced him to Halvorsen, and then to Leona who came in from the pantry with the tea things. I told him that *Starmaid* was not a trading vessel, and he found the con-

cept of a private yacht rather difficult to grasp.

"But," he said, "you must have come here for *something*."

"We did," averred Halvorsen. "Knowledge."

"Knowledge?" This was something that a native of Stree could understand. "Then you have come to the right world, Mr. Halvorsen. Knowledge is the one commodity in which we are rich."

"Then you can help me?" asked Halvorsen.

"What knowledge do you want?" asked the native.

"There must be some . . . some key to the secret of the Universe," said Halvorsen. "Have you got it?"

Stressor delicately sipped his tea, the cup looking tiny and fragile in his talons, against his gaping, needle-toothed mouth. He said, "There is a key; we have known that for generations. We have discussed it for as many generations. Some of our philosophers say that they know what it is, say that what they have learned of human customs since our first contact with your race has given them the answer. There are those of us who cannot accept that answer, myself among them. We are not, as Captain Merrill will tell you, an overly

proud people—but even humility has its limits . . ."

Halvorsen's eyes were shining.

"What is the key?" he demanded.

"Sir," Stressor replied stiffly, "I will not tell you. I, like you, am an intelligent being, and feel that this universe was created so that intelligent beings might appreciate it, come to a full understanding of it. All I can suggest is that you see Ossan. He is too old to have much pride left . . ."

"Can you bring him here?" asked Halvorsen.

"He is too old to travel," said Stressor.

As Stressor had told us, the Streen are not an overly proud people. They consider it no disgrace to act as beasts of burden. So it was that the following day, early, Halvorsen, Leona and myself, riding in saddles strapped to the backs of three of the Streen, set out for the rugged, hilly country in which Ossan lived. Stressor came with us, laden with gifts for the ancient philosopher as well as with our own food supplies, leading what could, incorrectly, be called the cavalcade. The mode of transport was not too uncomfortable—but it is rather disconcerting to be expected to carry on a

conversation with the animal you are riding . . .

It was late afternoon when we reached the cave in which Ossan lived—a dark hole in a sheer cliff of red sandstone. He came shambling into the sunlight, blinking his filmed eyes. The scales of his body were flaking, crumbling almost, and the dry, musty stench of him was overpowering. He said something that was all clicks and hisses. Stressor replied in kind.

My mount turned his great, reptilian head on the long neck and said, "You can get down, Captain Merrill. Ossan has said that he will talk to you."

We got down, glad enough of the chance to stretch our legs. We took advantage of the slight breeze and stood to windward of the aged Streen, watched while Stressor displayed the gifts that we had brought—the tea, the sugar, the books. Halvorsen looked disappointed when the lizard philosopher displayed no great interest in the latter. The hissing, clicking conversation continued.

Stressor at last translated. "Ossan says," he told us, "that first of all you must tell him all about yourselves—who you are, what you are, what you have seen. He says that you Earthmen brought

the idea of trade to this world, and that he will trade knowledge for knowledge, ideas for ideas."

So we spread our sleeping bags—they had been carried in Stressor's pack—on the hard rock and sat down. Halvorsen talked first, with lengthy pauses for translation. He told of his humble youth as a plumber, of the invention of the first really satisfactory Free Fall toilet that had brought him fame—and to have one's name spread throughout the Galaxy in every ship is fame—and fortune. He talked of the intricacies of finance, of the problems of manufacture. He talked of the Foundation that bore his name and that had yet to make any real contribution to the knowledge of mankind.

It was my turn next. I talked of the worlds I had seen, of the people I had met, of life in the starships. Had Leona not been there I might have talked of the women I had known.

When Leona told her story it was dark, and the few, faint stars were shining in the black sky. It was dark, and it was cold, and Stressor broke out the efficient little heater from his pack and set it up so

that we all derived some benefit from the warmth. He made tea, too, and we sipped the hot fluid gratefully. After he had finished his cup the old philosopher hissed a few words to the agent, turned and vanished into his cave.

"He," said Stressor, "will talk in the morning."

After a not very satisfying supper we crawled into our bags and tried to sleep, both Leona and myself resenting the presence of our employer and the great lizards.

Morning came, the sun striking our faces like a blow.

For a long, hazy moment I was completely bewildered, thought that I was recovering from a night's debauch, sleeping in some gutter in Port Forlorn. I opened my eyes and saw the red cliffs, the clear sky. I saw Leona emerging from the cocoon of her sleeping bag, still neat and unruffled in spite of the primitive conditions in which we had slept. I saw Halvorsen stretching his arms and yawning, looking not like a wise old ape but, at this moment, like an exceptionally stupid one. I saw Stressor and the three Streen who had carried us, rising from the hollow in the rocks where, curled lizardlike, they had slept.

Leona went to our supply pack, got out cleansing tissues, comb and mirror, wandered a little way down the ravine to where a bend hid her from sight. While she was gone I busied myself with our portable stove, with water and tea, with self-heating cans of rations. The Streen watched with interest but no envy. Our food was unpalatable to them and, reptiles that they were, they could go for weeks without sustenance. Even so, they had become addicted to tea and when the boiling water was poured over the leaves their wide nostrils began to twitch.

Halvorsen got out of his bag and went along the ravine in the opposite direction to that taken by Leona. Stressor said, "That is one thing that we have in common with you Earthmen—a desire for privacy on certain occasions." I didn't feel in a very philosophical mood, grunted a curt acknowledgement. I knew Stressor of old, knew that with very little encouragement he would deliver a long and boring lecture on sanitation as practised in various parts of the Galaxy, the bulk of the material garnered from the tapes and books that Rim Runners' ships had brought to his world.

There was a scrabbling noise inside the cave. Old Ossan emerged, looking more like a dinosaur that should have been extinct a million years ago than like one of the thinkers of his world.

He said simply, "I smell tea."

"But he can't speak English!" I exclaimed.

"He can," said Stressor, "when he wants to. This is one of the times."

"Give me some tea," demanded the ancient Streen.

I poured him a cup. He took it in his claws, drained it, almost boiling that it was. He held it to me to be refilled. He was gulping his third cup when Halvorsen and Leona returned.

"I am ready to talk," he said. "Listen carefully. You will not find what you search on the Rim. Your Key is not here. North you must run, and North again, North from the Center. There, I think, you will find the Key. This I ask—that you let me know what it is that you find. I would know, before I die, if my theory is correct."

"What is your theory?" asked Halvorsen.

Ossan was silent.

"We are a humble people," said Stressor, "but we have our pride. We hope that Os-

san's theory is wrong. We hope that you will be able to prove that it is wrong."

And that was all that we could get out of any of them. There was some sort of tabu involved—but what it was we could not determine. Bribery was useless and we were in no position to make threats even if we had been so foolhardy as to ignore Federation law. So we said good-bye—without reluctance on the part of either Leona or myself—and let our carriers take us back to the ship.

Bitterly I resented Halvorsen's demon, the demon that was driving him so far and so fast in the pursuit of knowledge, the demon that was driving all of us so far and fast. Sun after sun we passed, world after world, planets that we had never seen before and might never have the chance to see again. The ship reeked of hot oil and metal and our combined body odors, efficient though her air conditioning system was. At no spaceport did we halt for more than the bare minimum of time necessary for us to replenish exhausted supplies. Had Halvorsen not been a heavy smoker I doubt that we should have halted at all—for all essentials *Starmaid* was

a self-contained, self-perpetuating unit.

It should have been a honeymoon voyage for Leona and myself, but it was not. We, like the ship, like all in her, were too hard driven. Our tempers became frayed and we began to snap at each other. I forgot to maintain the standards of neatness upon which Leona had always insisted, and that made matters worse, so much so that my lapses became deliberate instead of accidental.

And so we drove on, across the Galaxy, across the northern "surface" of the great Lens. We landed at last on Polaria, a world as bleak and desolate as any of the Rim Worlds, a world whose sparsely settled Northern Hemisphere looked always to the Ultimate Night. But it was not the emptiness of the sky that made that hemisphere unpopular—because the night sky was far from empty. It was alive with flowing, coalescing shapes, with great curtains and streamers of cold flame. It was beautiful—and frightening. It was something to marvel at, to admire—but not to live with. It was something to be explained scientifically that, in spite of the scientific explanations, still

evoked a feeling of superstitious terror.

We made our landing in the North, although there was no spaceport there. We set *Star-maid* down on a great, level field of ice, staying her off against the perpetual bitter winds. We helped Halvorsen and Cressy to set up their instruments outside the ship, instruments that were, to me, a complete enigma. We watched MacIlwraith doing inexplicable things to his Mannschenn Drive unit. We left the specialists to their mysteries, went to talk with the old Doctor.

He said, "I'm an old man, Merrill, and I thought that I had lost the capacity to be afraid of anything—but I'm scared. I'm a scientist of sorts, Merrill, and until now I've always thought that there should be no limit to Man's knowledge—but now I'm no longer sure of that . . ."

"But what are they doing, Dr. Rayner?" asked the girl. "What are they doing?"

"Mr. Halvorsen thinks," replied the Doctor, "that this is one of the sources from which the continuously created hydrogen atoms flow into the Universe. He has set up meters to measure that flow."

"I guessed that," I said. "But what is MacIlwraith do-

ing to the Drive? I know that I'm only the Captain, but I think that I'm entitled to some word of explanation from the Chief Engineer."

"I can only guess," said the old man. "I heard them talking about it some time ago, before you joined us. Halvorsen reasoned that the influx of primal matter must be from some other dimension, and MacIlwraith believes that it will be possible to adjust the Drive so that *Starmaid* can stem the stream, follow it to its real source."

"Interdimensional travel is impossible," I said. "Like Time Travel, it's just something that science fiction writers play with."

The Doctor bared his teeth in a ghastly grin. "That's just what the Twentieth Century rocketeers must have said about the Faster Than Light Drive. Me, I know MacIlwraith well enough to be scared."

"And I'm scared," said Leona, drawing closer to me.

"I'm not," I declared, not too untruthfully. "I'm annoyed. Legally speaking, I'm the Lord and Master of this wagon, notwithstanding the fact that Mr. Halvorsen is the Owner. I resent being kept in the dark."

"And what," asked a fresh

voice, "do you intend doing about it, Captain Merrill?"

I turned abruptly, saw our employer's figure framed in the doorway. He was still wearing the synthefurs that had protected him from the cold while he worked outside, although he had removed the gloves and thrown back the hood. His face was glowing with color. He looked almost a young man, far younger than Dr. Rayner's ministrations could ever have made him.

"Mr. Halvorsen," I said, "I demand an explanation. I am Master of this ship, and I have discovered that Mr. MacIlwraith is doing something to the most important of her propulsive units that could not, so far as I can gather, be classed as routine overhaul. In my opinion, he is jeopardizing the safety of the vessel."

"Are you an engineer, Captain Merrill?"

"No—but the fact that I hold a Master's certificate gives me a smattering of engineering knowledge."

"A smattering . . . Captain Merrill, you are under contract. Your contract binds you to take the ship from Point A to Point B, as required by the Owner. I am the Owner. Should you refuse to carry out my instructions I could,

should I so desire, sue you for breach of contract."

"I can resign," I said.

"You can give a month's notice," he told me. "But until that month, as measured by the G. M. T. chronometer, has expired, you are bound to carry out my instructions. Should you stage a one-man strike—then Miss Wayne can handle the ship."

"I'm with Charles in this," said Leona.

Halvorsen smiled. He said, "I realize that the voyage here from Stree has been a great strain on all of us. I know that I, myself, feel that I have come so close to my objective that I will let nothing stand in my way." The smile vanished from his face. "*Nothing*. But I'm asking you, Captain Merrill, I'm asking you, not commanding you, to take *Starmaid* up as soon as MacIlwraith finishes his modifications."

"Where to?" I demanded. "Where to? And, come to that, what are the modifications? I'm no scientist, no engineer, but I do know that the Mannschenn Drive shouldn't be monkeyed with."

"Where to?" echoed Halvorsen. "If I knew, Merrill, I'd feed the data into the Geigenheim and let *Starmaid*

take herself there. But I don't know—and that's why I have to have a human captain at the controls. Of course, if you're scared . . ."

"Damn you!" I swore. "I am scared, and I'd be a fool if I weren't. I've heard all the stories about what happens when the Drive gets out of kilter and I've even believed some of 'em. But I'll never let it be said that I was too scared to . . . to . . ."

"To follow where a mere, glorified plumber led?" asked Halvorsen.

"I was trying to put the idea into more diplomatic language," I admitted. "But what is MacIlwraith playing at? Tell me that."

"The only engineering that I know anything about is sanitary engineering," said Halvorsen. "But I think that I can give you a rough idea. The principle of the Mannschenn Drive is precession, gyroscopic precession. Its gyroscopes precess at right angles to the three dimensions of Space, in Time. But Time is only one of an infinitude of dimensions. What if we could achieve precession through Fifth, or Sixth, or Seventh Dimensions? What if we could precess into that dimension from which the flow of hydrogen atoms emanates?"

"And you think that MacIlwraith can do it?" I asked.

"I'm sure that MacIlwraith can do it," he stated.

"But *should* MacIlwraith do it?" asked old Rayner.

"Getting religious in your old age, Doc?" sneered Halvorsen.

"No, but . . ."

"Even you can't keep me alive and kicking much longer," said Halvorsen. "And when I've found the Key I'll be willing to make my exit."

The Engineer, accompanied by Cressy, pushed his way into the little cabin. He looked more like a Neanderthaler who has just dispatched an enemy with a stone club than a scientist who has just solved a knotty problem—but his air of triumph was unmistakable.

"Take her up as soon as you like!" he cried. "The job's finished! Take her up as soon as you like!"

I looked at Leona. Her face was pale, and I thought I saw her lips frame the word, "*Don't!*" But if she said anything it was lost in the triumphant uproar created by Halvorsen, MacIlwraith and Cressy.

I took her up, the glare of our exhaust reflected from the icefield and yet not as bright as the aurora in that northern

sky. I took her up, through and past the curtains and the streamers of cold fire, of pallid fire and rosy fire and fire that flaunted a purple such as no emperor ever wore. I took her up into the emptiness, the blackness—and the skin temperature gauges told me that Space, in this region, was far from being a vacuum.

Leona sat at my side, saying nothing. A little away from us was Halvorsen, chuckling happily over that fantastically sensitive Mass Proximity Indicator. I looked at him with distaste, reminded of some unpleasant, gray little monkey engrossed in some trifle that has captured its curiosity. And MacIlwraith, I thought, he's another of the same breed, an apeman, an apeman with brains, but still with that monkey taint to his character . . . I turned to look at Leona, and remembered the old proverb, *Curiosity killed the cat*. If Halvorsen's curiosity kills *my* cat, I thought, I'll wring his blasted neck.

"You're bucking the stream, Merrill," chortled Halvorsen. "You're doing fine!"

"And what do I do next?" I asked.

"Cut the reaction drive as soon as you're ready. Turn on the Mannschenn."

Nothing can happen, I thought. Nothing can possibly happen. I don't believe that anything can happen.

I cut the drive, felt the upsurge against my seat belt as the pseudo-gravity of acceleration abruptly died. "Mannschen Drive ready?" I asked. "Mannschem Drive ready!" came MacIlwraith's reply over the intercom. "Mannschem Drive on!" I said, throwing the switch. I heard the familiar whine of the starting gyroscopes, felt the familiar giddiness and loss of orientation in Time as well as Space as the temporal field built up. I looked at the stern vision plate, expecting to see the great, starry field astern of us that was the Galaxy undergo its familiar transformation into a topologist's nightmare in glorious technicolor.

Instead, it . . . vanished.

There was a gleaming whiteness ahead of us, around us . . .

Ahead of us . . .

This I'll say for myself, I had the presence of mind to refrain from using the rockets. The Mannschem Drive was still running, and any alteration to the ship's mass while that system of cock-eyed gyroscopes is in operation can have results that are cata-

strophic. I refrained from using the rockets, relied on the control surfaces. They surely shouldn't have worked—the ship was in airless Space (or was she?)—but they did. We turned away from the gleaming wall with which collision was imminent, pushed on and . . . and up? But every schoolboy knows that there is neither up nor down in Space.

"I'm turning her," I said. "I'm turning her. We're going back out the way we came in—but you'd better tell MacIlwraith to run the Drive in reverse."

"Why?" asked Halvorsen—but he had not disputed my decision to turn.

"Because I don't want to be thrown back into the Galaxy as free, individual hydrogen atoms, that's why."

"How do you know?"

"It's a guess, and I hope it's a good one . . ."

I struggled to keep the ship in the center of the great, convoluted, white-gleaming tunnel, and, even so, managed briefly to wonder just what had happened. Had the dimensional shift resulted in a vast increase of size? It must have, but the mechanics of it I was content to leave to the physicists if they ever believed our story, if they ever heard it, even.

I heard Halvorsen babbling excitedly into the intercom, heard the Engineer's replies. I became aware that the droning song of the gyroscopes had faded, had restarted again on a slightly different note. Then there was light ahead of us—not a sterile whiteness any more but the great field of Galaxy, twisted and distorted beyond recognition, shining with a myriad of colors—but still the Galaxy.

For all its fairness I knew now what it was, and Leona, my once fanatically cleanly Leona knew what it was too. Her lips curled in the familiar expression of repugnance and then, quite suddenly, she started to sob. She said brokenly to Halvorsen, "You've ruined everything, for everybody. How can any decent person live in this Universe after what you've found? How can we endure the . . . filth?" Her sobbing became hysterical.

Shocked, I stared at her. Already there was a coarsening of her fine features, a subtle slumping of the fine, taut lines of her body, a foreshadowing of the slattern within that she had, until now, so firmly repressed. *It doesn't matter, I wanted to say. It doesn't matter, Leona—you're still you and I'm still me, and we have each other.* But it would not

have been true. I was still myself and would be able to fall back into my bad old ways without effort; Leona would never be her old self again, and both of us knew it.

"What does she mean, Merrill?" asked Halvorsen.

My hand hesitated over the switch that I hoped—or did I so hope?—that would bring us back to normal Space and Time, to the fair worlds that were the homes of men, to the worlds that once we had thought were fair, once upon a time, a long time ago. I thought, *but I'm not fussy*. I pulled the switch, mechanically set about shaping our trajectory for Polaria.

"What does she mean, Merrill?" asked Halvorsen again.

"You know," I said curtly. "You know. I've already told you once. I told you when I first met you, back in Port Forlorn. Remember? When you said that you wanted to know *everything*, and I said that I'd already told you everything there was to know . . .

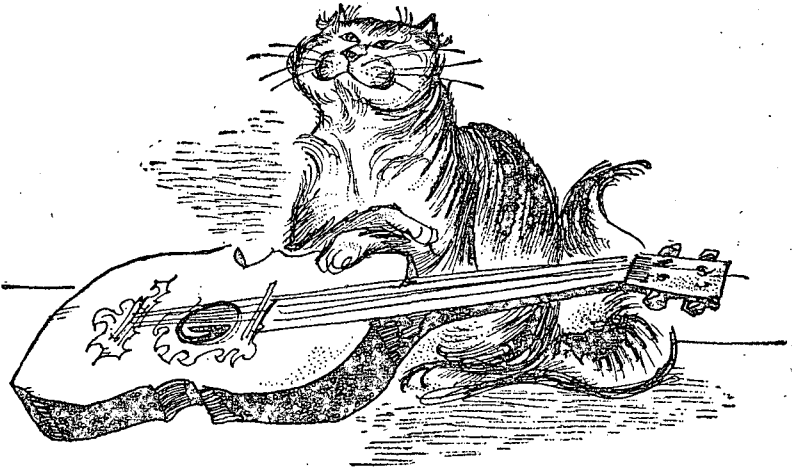
"Halvorsen, the not-so-wise monkey," I sneered. "Halvorsen, the Outhouse King! You have found your Key, Halvorsen, haven't you?

"The Outhouse Key!"

THE END

THE KEY

87



BOTTLE IT UP

By RON GOULART

*He was handsome, virile
and on the make. She
was rich, available and
bewitching. That was
the only trouble.*

HIS last performance was always over around one-thirty and he would meet her at the little Italian place next door for a drink. Ted Donner set his guitar case down next to the brass hatrack and walked-across to their usual booth, nodding at the gray-haired bartender.

Karen Tatum smiled up at

him. "Your second appearance was particularly good, Ted." Her face was just a little too round and broad to be really pretty.

Ted Donner smiled and slid into the booth across from her. "I think I'm improving." He reached across the checker-topped table and picked up Karen's silver cigarette case.

"I had a talk with Eddie between shows and he says he'll keep you on two more weeks at least," Karen said, brushing back her long dark hair.

"That's fine," said Donner.

The bartender brought them two cappuccinos on a black tray.

Donner moved his hand toward his wallet.

"On the tab, Victor," Karen said.

The old man smiled and walked away. Donner had the feeling the bartender suspected them of being lovers. "Well, cheers," Donner said. But the glass was still a little too hot to pick up. He didn't like cappuccino much anyway. He could wait.

Karen sipped hers. "Very pleasant," she said. "I think in a few months you'll be ready for places like the Hungry I and even Bimbo's."

Donner grinned. "Maybe. No more charity bazaars and county fairs anyway."

Karen shook her head. "No. Not with me looking after your career." She circled her glass with both hands, looking thoughtful. Her fingers were plump and the emerald ring she wore cut a black line.

"You know how much I appreciate this all, Karen," said Donner, looking away. Three men in tuxedos came in and hurried up to the bar.

"I had a talk with your landlady this afternoon," Karen said, taking a cigarette out of her case.

Donner held out his lighter. "I hope you told her how much I like the place. It's quite an improvement over the guest house."

"I've always liked Pacific Heights," Karen said, steady-ing his hand with hers.

"Thanks. Especially with a view like yours."

Nodding, Donner leaned back. "I really appreciate the place."

"Uncle Henry left for New York this morning."

"Oh? Kind of sudden."

"It's like that in his business."

Donner didn't know what the business was, but he nodded understandingly.

"He'll be gone six months or more," Karen said, exhaling smoke down at the table top. "I think it would be simpler if you lived in our place from now on, Ted."

Donner picked up his glass. "Well, if you think so. Are you sure it won't be any trouble?"

The girl laughed softly. "Don't worry. Our relationship remains the same. I just want to have you around more. Even watching you do three shows a night doesn't satisfy me." Her sigh sounded fairly real. "It's funny, Ted. You're one of the first things I've really been able to keep up an interest in. Over any long period." Her nose always wrinkled when she said things like this.

"Two months," said Donner, turning his head at the sound of one of the tuxedoed

men slipping off his stool to the floor. "That's not so long."

"It is for me," said Karen. She ground out her cigarette in an ashtray with a picture of Venice in its bottom. "All your things are moved. Records, books, clothes. So you can come with me now."

"How'd you get it done so quick?" Donner said, watching her draw on her black gloves."

"Nothing to it."

The bartender was helping the fallen man up, but he paused to smile at Donner and Karen as they left.

"Would you mind driving?" Karen said, taking his arm.

Donner moved his guitar from between them. "Fine," he said.

Donner stood at the window of his large bedroom and watched the bay. There was San Francisco stretched out white and flat beyond the water. A couple dozen bright sailboats arcing away from the Gate. Donner smiled and went into his den. He took a stack of 78's off a shelf and put them on the automatic changer of the hi-fi set.

Lighting a cigarette he sat back in a bucket chair with his feet up on the marble-topped coffee table. He half-closed his eyes and listened

carefully to the blues singers that slapped one by one onto the turntable. Donner was aware that he could never approach any of these men as far as quality went. But it was a good idea for a night club folk singer to have some obscure blues numbers in his repertoire.

He got up to play a song called *Bottle It Up And Go* over again. It might be something audiences could sing along with. Not another *On Top Of Old Smokey*, but something catchy. Maybe he'd suggest getting a tape recorder to Karen so all the 78's could be put on tape. Actually, that was a safer, more convenient way to do things.

"Karen wants to know if you'd like a gin fizz on the patio," said a dignified voice behind him.

Donner clicked off the phonograph and turned. "Beg pardon?"

A round orange cat was sitting on Donner's guitar case, its tail swishing. "I said, Karen wonders if you'd join her for a gin fizz in the patio. It's pretty pleasant out this morning. I recommend it."

"What kind of fizz?" said Donner, backing toward his bedroom door. Once in bed he could go to sleep again and forget everything.

The cat grinned. "I'm sorry I didn't get to meet you when you moved in. I was chasing a partridge and I just got back today. My name's Chesh."

"Chesh?" After two tries Donner found the doorknob.

"Short for Cheshire Cat. A little precious. That's Karen for you."

Donner remembered that one cappuccino should not cause a hangover. Not one like this. He walked slowly over to his guitar case and patted the cat's head. It was real and it purred. "Karen's in the patio you say?"

The cat nodded. "By the pool. I'll be down in awhile. But I've got a new ball of yarn I want to worry first."

"Fine, Chesh." Donner went into the bedroom and picked out a pair of plaid trunks. He put them on and found a clean sweat shirt.

Karen's skin didn't tan. She lifted a deep pink arm in greeting when she saw Donner. Adjusting her harlequin sunglasses she stretched out in a lounging chair. "Nice morning."

Donner noticed the fresh silver fizz on the metal table next to Karen. He picked it up. "Karen, I think I've lost my mind."

Karen was very still for a

moment and then she started laughing. "You met Chesh?"

"There is a cat?"

"Yes. And he talks."

Donner sat down at the edge of the pool and took off his tennis shoes. "Well, why is that, Karen?"

"I'm sorry he scared you, Ted. I suppose I should have found another way to tell you about my uncle and me."

"Just what?"

Karen came over and sat next to him. "Uncle Henry and I are very secure financially, Ted. That's why I've been able to take such an interest in your career."

Donner watched the pattern the sunlight made in the water. "And I appreciate it."

"I know, Ted. The point is that we earn our living with magic."

"I didn't know your uncle was in show business."

Karen smiled. "Not that kind of magic. Real magic. Spells, hexes, teleportations. Things in that line. There aren't really too many good wizards these days and so it pays very well. Of course, I help Uncle Henry."

"You mean, all your money comes from what you and your uncle earn by magic?"

"That and some investments. Uncle Henry's very good at predicting stock rises

and such." She glanced at Donner. "I hope you don't mind being backed up by money that was earned by black magic. I felt I should tell you sooner or later."

Donner let himself drop down into the pool slowly. When he came up he caught the rail and looked at Karen. "Not at all. Business is business."

She smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way. That it's not important."

Donner relaxed in the water. "I tell you, Karen. What's important to me is having a fairly comfortable position in life. And, of course, my singing."

"That's important to me, too," said Karen. "You are, after all, the only person I've been able to stay interested in. I'm usually so—well—changeable."

"I understand," said Donner. "And I appreciate it all. Really, Karen."

"I'm very glad you can accept this all."

"Of course, I can." He pushed off from the side of the pool and began swimming away from Karen. "I'm pretty adaptable."

After he had driven the gray Mercedes into the garage and turned off the ignition

Donner sat back. He smoked a half a cigarette before he got his guitar out of the back seat and went across the gravel path to the house.

Karen, wearing a quilted blue robe, was sitting in the living room near the long window. Only one bulb in the floor lamp was on. Karen smiled faintly, turning her pale face toward him.

"Feeling better?" Donner asked, dropping his guitar case in the hall.

"Much. Uncle Henry has never quite figured out the common cold. But the potion he invented is fairly effective. Would you play something?"

Donner leaned in the doorway. "Well, I'm a little tired. But okay."

"How was the audience?"

Donner unsnapped the fasteners around the case lid. "Fair."

"I'm glad I was able to get you into *The Snapping Cat*. It's a step up for you. Don't you feel that?"

Bringing his guitar into the room Donner nodded. "Yes, I do. And I appreciate it." He sat down on the low sofa, resting one foot on a hassock.

"Did that girl with the off-key voice go over any better tonight?"

"Jay? She's not a bad singer. Hell, she's only a couple

months out of college. I think she's pretty good."

Karen frowned. "I suspected as much."

"Huh?" Donner found the guitar was still in tune.

"I suppose that's why you are late. You stopped and had a drink with that flat-chested Betty Hutton."

The mantel clock said two-thirty. "It's the time we usually get home."

"But I was here sick. If you didn't stop any place why did it take you just as long?"

Donner dropped the guitar down between his legs. "As a matter of fact, I did have a beer with Jay. Some drunk Shriner heckled her at the second show and she was upset."

"A beer," Karen said, her nose wrinkling. "Well, that's fine. I knew that was it."

"Oh? Do you have a crystal ball, too?"

Karen stood up. "Don't make fun of us. Or what we do."

"It's a living," Donner said. "But just leave me alone about things like this."

"You know where you'd be if I hadn't taken an interest in you?"

"In the gutter? That's how the cliché goes, isn't it?"

Karen picked up a pink kleenex and blew her nose.

"Don't be sarcastic, Ted." She sat down slowly. "You'd be playing *The Blue Tail Fly* at lettuce growers' picnics. Or at benefits, like that one for the Young Democrats."

"You're sentimental at heart, Karen. Remembering our first meeting. And it's over three months ago."

Karen brought her fingertips together. "I'd rather you didn't have anything to do with this Jay."

"Now, look, Karen. As far as my career goes you can tell me anything you like. I do appreciate your financing me like this. Gambling on my success. And I hope I'll be able to pay you back."

"It's no gamble, Ted. You amuse and entertain *me*. I'm not losing anything. Even if you don't become a success."

"Okay," said Donner. He rested his guitar on his knee. "But I understand our relationship to be only a business one. I wish you wouldn't worry about other things."

"I'm not jealous," Karen said. "Sleep with this scrawny Ethel Merman. But I don't want you dawdling around with her when you should be here. Will you play something?"

Donner sat the guitar on the cushion next to him and

took off his sport coat. "Warm," he said. Something rustled in the coat pocket. "Oh, is Chesh around? They had some fish hors d'oeuvres left over and I brought him some." He took a small white paper bag out of his coat. Suddenly the sack jumped into the air and vanished with a pop.

"Play something," said Karen, leaning on her chair arm. "I had to get rid of Chesh. He was getting on my nerves."

"Oh," said Donner. He picked up his guitar and played a couple of flemenco numbers he'd learned from a Carlos Montoya record.

Karen removed the bathing cap and shook out her long black hair. The bright sun brought out the pink of her skin. "Well, I suppose I can let you borrow the car. I was thinking, though, that since the club is closed tonight we could just sit around at home here. I could fix dinner and then you could play some things for me."

Donner was under water during part of this speech, but he caught the tone of it. He climbed out of the pool and grabbed up a large white terry towel. "I can hike into Sausalito I suppose and catch a bus.

I guess they run a bus out on Sundays. Sure, they must."

Karen tilted her head in the direction of the metal table and two gin fizzes appeared. "Drink?"

Donner hesitated. "Well, fine. Thanks."

"You're going to meet this Jay?"

Donner sat down in a deck chair, balancing his glass on his knee. "Yes. There's a movie we want to see."

Karen sighed. "I thought The Snapping Cat was a step up for you. Now I'm wondering."

Donner looked away. "I don't want to argue or anything, Karen."

"I noticed an empty place on Broadway near Columbus," Karen said, moving nearer to him.

"A parking place?"

"No, I mean a building. A place that could be opened as a bar."

"Oh?"

"Does that interest you?"

"Real estate never much fascinated me."

Karen knelt down on the towel he had dropped near his chair. "A place we could open. I think I can get a liquor license fairly easy. If not, we can sell beer and wine. Maybe just run an espresso house."

"Not espresso," said Don-

ner. "Every boheme over in North Beach is putting in an espresso machine."

"All right, no espresso." Karen laughed and looked up at him. "Do you like the idea, though? Our own club?"

"It's fine. The financial end bothers me. What about that?"

"I can certainly afford a club."

"If it failed. Might take me a long time to pay you back."

"Don't worry. It wouldn't fail. I'd see to that."

"How?"

"I've told you I've picked up a lot of tricks from Uncle Henry." She bit her thumb and then said, "Sometimes if you just concentrate hard enough you can simply will people to come into a place. Even to like your decor and order drinks. And your entertainment."

"You mean to hypnotize them?"

"In a way. Uncle Henry and I like to call it telepathic advertising."

Donner stood up. "I don't like that idea, Karen. A club, maybe. Someday. But not this other stuff." He walked to the edge of the pool. Slowly he turned and eyed the kneeling girl. "Karen?"

"Yes, Ted."

"Have you used any of this

stuff before? To make people hire me. Or come and see me and applaud."

"You're sure of your own talent, aren't you?"

"Certainly. Well, more or less. Nobody's ever all sure, all the time. Karen, did you?"

"I enjoy your playing and singing. Very much. Forget what I said, Ted."

"Damn it, Karen."

Karen's hand moved in the air and then something jingled and flashed in it. She threw Donner the keys to the Mercedes. "Go ahead into the city. I think I'll get to work on planning our club."

Donner let the keys hit the green tile. He watched Karen for a moment, then stooped and picked them up.

It was raining and the rum-pus room was gray around the edges. Karen, smiling, pointed at the model on the ping-pong table. It was a scale model of the proposed night club, and filled all the table on one side of the net.

Donner looked down into the roofless club, poked at the small stage with his finger. There was even a small model mike. As Donner moved his hand the microphone made an odd sound. "Does that little thing work?"

"Oh, yes," said Karen. "It's

a working model. All of it. With a knack for carpentry and a little black magic you can do quite a lot."

Donner tried to convey admiration with a look. He stooped further and inspected the dressing rooms. Against a miniature make-up table leaned a small guitar, about five inches high. "Fine," said Donner.

Karen came up beside him. "I've been thinking, Ted. I'd like to see your career advance and all that. Basically, though, I enjoy you as a source of entertainment for myself."

The rain was sliding down the side of the house and splashing on the patio stones. "Maybe a club isn't a good idea then."

"No, it's quite a fine idea. I think it will be a lot more convenient. No more trips over the bridge. And since I'll run the place you'll perform every night, no day off. And no ingenue singers to take up your time."

"You're going to build the club near here? In Sausalito?"

Karen shook her head and crossed to a cupboard. She took out a model of a cottage and came back. She put the cottage on the clear side of the ping-pong table and went to open the French window leading to the patio. A cold

wind came in. "In good weather we can keep both out here. Bad days it'll be the table, I guess."

Donner reached into his pocket for a cigarette. "Could you close the door, Karen?"

"You'll have the use of the patio. Nothing more than that at present. Uncle Henry came up with a fine magic circle, or force fields as they call them nowadays. That will keep you from running off or getting lost."

"Getting lost?"

"Yes," said Karen, shutting the french window and pointing at him. "Because you'll only be ten inches high. I figured out the scale."

Donner blinked and started to speak, but he became dizzy and found that his mouth wouldn't open. He sank to the floor and then passed out.

The sparrows didn't bother him. Probably Karen had fixed that up. Donner stretched out on the deck chair and glanced up at the zinnias, bright in the sun. Drinking his gin and tonic he wondered how much gin was in it.

He set his glass aside and closed his eyes. He almost smiled, he was almost adjusted to it. The whole thing was ridiculous, but not as bad as he had expected. Karen had

reduced his books and records for him. The cottage was the best place he'd ever lived in.

The meals were good. Food always appeared on the dining room table at the right times. No dishes to do. Performing every night was a slight strain. He could sleep late in the mornings.

Ridiculous situation? Maybe. He had a fine place to live, a chance to perform. That's what every artist wanted. Every folk singer. Security.

Donner sat up. The security thing was a slight problem. Karen was pretty unstable. Maybe she'd get tired of him.

Well, then she'd probably just unshrink him and turn him loose.

About that cat Karen had had. Had she just unmagiced it and turned it loose? Somehow, Donner felt she hadn't been that kindly about Chesh.

He grinned and stretched. Nothing to worry about. He was, after all, the one person Karen was fond of. Not so much for his personality as for his singing and playing.

Something was banging in the rumpus room.

Karen'd been a little restless the night before while he was on. Girls get that way now and then.

Donner locked his hands be-

hind his head and smiled into the sun.

The banging became more rapid and then it stopped. A moment later the rumpus room door slammed.

Donner got curious and went inside. He wandered around the room. Nothing seemed different. Probably Karen had been patching something up.

The stroll around the room had tired him out and he decided to take a shower. The weather had been bad the night before and his cottage and the club were still up on the ping-pong table. He hurried up the ladder.

After his shower he felt fine. He had discovered a new way to sing *Careless Love* while he was soaping his back. When he was dressed he got his guitar and headed for the club to practice.

He slid his case under the net and climbed over. He stopped a few steps from the club entrance. Then he put his guitar case down and sat on it. He looked up at the neat white sign that had been nailed up next to the entrance.

"Doesn't mean anything," he said. "Things are still fine." He remained sitting, watching the sign.

It said: Closed Mondays.

THE END

BOTTLE IT UP

97

40-26-38

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

*She was well endowed, as any fool
could plainly see. But was it possible
that all the men in 2562 A.D.
were that foolish?*

AT FIRST Miss Cunningham thought the middle-aged man in the brown business suit was no different from the usual run of middle-aged men in brown business suits who eyed her hungrily whenever she walked into an afternoon cocktail bar. Then, as her eyes became accustomed to the dimness, she saw that the brown business suit this one was wearing had a strange cast and an even stranger cut, and that the look in his eyes had nothing to do with hunger.

The license plates on Miss Cunningham's 1960 Lightning-Bird did not lie when they said, 40-26-38. They did not even exaggerate. So her surprise was understandable. She was accustomed to men who tried to make her at first

sight, not men who looked at her as though she were a female brontosaurus that had just crawled out of a bog.

She was even more surprised when, a moment later, the brown-suited man *did* try to make her. "A Manhattan," she said automatically, when the bartender told her that the gentleman in the brown business suit would like to buy her a drink, and what would she have, please? Well, maybe he *liked* female brontosauri.

Whatever the case, his *modus operandi* was disappointing. Miss Cunningham, who was a connoisseur when it came to pickup-technique, winced a little when he edged down the bar and uttered the time-worn line, "I saw you sitting here all alone, and I'm all alone too, and I wondered

if—" and she would have shed him with a single chilling glance if the absence of hunger in his eyes had not piqued her curiosity. Yes, and irritated her ego, too. 40-26-38 weren't numerals to be taken lightly, and any man—especially a middle-aged one—who did take them lightly needed an orientation course in American culture.

"Yes, I *am* all alone," she said presently. "And feeling kind of blue, too."

The brown-suited man looked mystified. "*Blue?*"

"You know. Disgusted. Fed up. The same old routine every day. The same old passes . . . I'm a photographer's model, you know."

The brown-suited man nodded as though he'd known what she was all along, and had just been waiting for her to reveal it. "And I'm a photographer," he said. "A photographer from the future."

Miss Cunningham gaped. But that was all right. Gaping abetted the full-lipped attractiveness of her face. "I don't believe you," she said.

"Of course you don't. If I were you, I wouldn't believe me either—without proof." So saying, the brown-suited man pulled out a chromium dusted wallet and exhibited



the following articles: a 14¢ postage stamp with Harry Truman's picture on it; a 36¢ postage stamp with Dwight D. Eisenhower's picture on it; a 59¢ postage stamp with Lawrence Welk's picture on it; a lottery stub that read for the benefit of the Veterans of Extraterrestrial Wars.

There was also a tri-dimensional photograph of a gleaming vehicle so low and long it made Miss Cunningham's Lightning - Bird look like a Model-T; a little metal calendar that glowed what day it was (October 24, 2562?); a sheaf of small, tissue-thin bills ranging in denomination from \$5.00 to \$500.00, each denomination featuring the engraving of a different face, none of which were familiar to Miss Cunningham, except for the one on the fifty, which she recognized as Yogi Berra's; a walking license (a *walking license?*); a telescopic comb with an inbuilt massage unit; and a personal card that read:

Jon J. Jerrold, Photographiste

Specializing in promotional
photographing of all kinds
Visiphone: TR. 36-4021
Suite 902, Godfrey Bldg.

"So you see," Jon J. Jerrold said, replacing the articles in his wallet and returning the wallet to his pocket, "I really *am* from the future."

Miss Cunningham pinched herself. "Ouch!" she said.

Jerrold laughed. "Oh, this is really happening all right. Though I imagine it does seem rather bizarre to you. It is rather unusual."

"It seems crazy, if that's what you mean," Miss Cunningham said. "Not just your being able to travel in time, but your coming all the way back here . . . Why?"

"Because of you, Miss . . . Cunningham, is it not? I've been observing you through a time-scope for weeks now, and I'm convinced you're the perfect person for the job."

"What job?"

"I want you to be my model," Jerrold said. "I want to take you back with me to 2562."

Miss Cunningham gaped again. It was an afternoon for gaping. "But why *me*?" she said, after a while. "Why, of all the women there are in

1960, should you want to take *me* back with you?"

Jerrold lowered his eyes from her face, raised them quickly. "I think the reason . . . reasons . . . are quite apparent."

Miss Cunningham looked blank for a moment, but presently the message got through. She thrilled with mammalian pride. Still— "But you must have plenty of 40-26-38's in 2562," she objected. "Why come all the way back to 1960 for one?"

"That's just the point, Miss Cunningham. We do not have *any* 40-26-38's in 2562. For that matter we don't have any 32-26-38's. In fact, we don't even have any 31-26-38's." He waited for Miss Cunningham's next "Why?", then went on: "Women began changing during the latter years of the twentieth century—perhaps because of the accumulated hereditary effect of earlier and earlier weaning of infants, perhaps because of the accumulated hereditary effect of their assuming more and more of the responsibilities once pre-empted by men. No one knows for certain, but whatever the reason, in a few centuries the female bust atrophied to a point of near-non-existence. Now do you see

why I want to make you my model, Miss Cunningham?"

"No," Miss Cunningham said flatly. "Maybe there aren't any real women in your generation, but there's plenty of them in mine. You don't think I'm the only one the Bureau of Motor Vehicles issued special license plate numbers to, do you? Why don't you pick one of the others?"

"Because you have a certain . . . quality which none of the others possess."

Miss Cunningham was only human. "For how long?" she asked.

Jerrold looked uncomfortable. "That brings up an annoying aspect of time travel," he said. "A person returning to the past encounters nothing that is not already a part of his hereditary evolution and can therefore easily re-integrate himself into his society upon his return to his own time. But a person traveling into the future encounters many things that cannot conceivably be a part of his hereditary evolution, and if he were to be allowed to return to his own time, he might never be able to re-integrate himself into his own society. As his failure to do so might very well disrupt the entire

space-time continuum, we have a strictly enforced time-law prohibiting any such return."

"I'm not sure," Miss Cunningham said, "but it sounds as though you're trying to tell me that if I go with you to 2562, I'll have to stay there for the rest of my life."

"That's about the size of it. But," Jerrold hastened to add, "consider the advantages. As I mentioned before, I've been observing you through a timescope for weeks, so I know that at the moment you're unemployed because of a disagreement with your last employer—"

"The creep!" Miss Cunningham said. "He wanted to marry me, and every time I went out with someone else, he threw a fit. Believe me, I told *him* off!"

"—your last employer," Jerrold repeated. "And not only are you unemployed, you're deeply in debt, and despite your qualifications you have no immediate prospects of another job. Now I can offer you three times the wages you're accustomed to receiving, Miss Cunningham, using the 2562 wage-index as a basis, not the 1960 wage-index. In actual cash, you'll be receiving ten times what you receive now, or did, a short

time ago. Moreover, I can guarantee you a job for ten years, and, if your . . . ah . . . assets hold up, even longer. And if something should happen to me, there are hundreds of other photographers who would come begging for you to work for them—the way I'm begging you now. So what do you say, Miss Cunningham? Will you go?"

Miss Cunningham was silent for a while. She thought of many things: she thought of the fourteen payments she still owed on her Lightning-Bird; she thought of the bill from her dressmaker that had come in the morning's mail; she thought of the gray hair she'd discovered behind her left ear the day before yesterday; she thought of all the frustrated suitors she would leave behind her if she decided to go; but most of all, she thought of an old saying she'd heard once upon a time—

In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is King.

Miss Cunningham did a little paraphrasing: *In the country of the breastless, the one-breasted woman is Queen.*

And I've got two of them! she thought.

"I'll go," she said.

"Well," a tall, flat-chested girl said, when they stepped

into the gleaming studio, "I see you found one."

"Miss Cunningham, this is Miss Flynn," Jerrold said. "Miss Flynn, this is Miss Cunningham, your new co-worker."

For a girl who would probably end up being an old maid before she was thirty, Miss Cunningham thought, Miss Flynn was surprisingly lacking in the mousiness usually associated with such unfortunate creatures. Certainly, if she was in the least disconcerted by Miss Cunningham's obvious mammalian superiority, she did not show it. She stared for a moment, but that was all. But then, so had everyone else Miss Cunningham had seen on the mobile walkways that had transported her and Jerrold from the time travel agency to the Godfrey building. Especially the women, all of whom were flat-chested, but not quite as flat-chested as Miss Flynn.

Jerrold, clearly, was eager to get started. He handed Miss Cunningham and Miss Flynn a couple of flimsy garments that vaguely resembled half-slips, indicated a pair of dressing rooms, and told them to change. When Miss Cunningham returned to the studio proper, feeling a little *too* obvious now, Miss Flynn was

already there, and had taken her place on one of the two pedestals that stood before a life-size painting of a 2562 boudoir. At Jerrold's request, Miss Cunningham took her place on the other pedestal. She and Miss Flynn were inches apart now, and Miss Cunningham noticed that they were practically the same height. Their hair was the same color, too, and they had the same kind of noses . . . There was, Miss Cunningham realized with a start, an amazing resemblance between them. With one exception, of course. No, two exceptions. Could this resemblance, Miss Cunningham wondered, have anything to do with the "quality" Jerrold had alluded to in the 1960 cocktail bar? And then the logical answer virtually leaped at her, and she almost burst forth with delighted laughter. Why of course!

After taking a dozen shots from various angles, Jerrold told the two girls to step down. "Tomorrow we'll start on something different," he said. "I've been assigned to do the tri-di's for an article shortly to appear in *International Geographic*, called 'Sexual Customs of Certain Mid-twentieth Century Cultures.'

You'll be the motif, of course, Miss Cunningham. And we'll use you, Miss Flynn for contrast."

Miss Cunningham glowed. The future, certainly, spelled "success" for her. The world of 2562 was her apple, and it tasted better with each bite. "When will the pictures you just took be published?" she asked.

"Very soon," Jerrold said. "I went way past my deadline, trying to find someone like you. You'll find them in one of the feature ads in *Svelte*."

So for the next few weeks Miss Cunningham haunted the automatic newsstands. After a while she began to think that the next *Svelte* would never appear, but finally, stopping at a sidewalk stand one brisk November morning on her way to the studio, she saw the brand new issue iridescent behind one of the dispenser windows, just begging for someone to buy it.

She inserted the correct change, and when the magazine plopped into the tray, she picked it up and rifled through its pages to the ads. The one she wanted was on the inside of the back cover. It was a full page job, and for a moment her three dimensional image made even her

gasp. As she had guessed, it was a breast-aid ad—

But not exactly the kind of breast-aid she'd had in mind.

Miss Cunningham was not a person usually susceptible to insights, but standing there in the November street, two of them smote her simultaneously right between the eyes:

(1) Blaming "accumulated hereditary effects" for the decline and fall of the female bust was ridiculous in view of the relentless fact that woman had always tried to please man since time began and would go on trying to please him till time ended: when he preferred big breasts, she

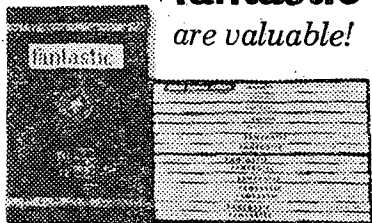
would grow them, and when he ceased to prefer them, she would cease growing them.

(2) If there were such things as breast-reducing aids in 2562, as the ad in *Svelte* would seem to indicate, it might be the better part of valor to take advantage of them, because in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is never King: he is the well-paid freak in the sideshow the monster hucksters hire to promulgate their wares.

Miss Cunningham glanced once more at the big BEFORE beneath her picture, then closed the magazine and threw it in the gutter.

THE END

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THE 4-SIDED TRIANGLE

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

You've often requested something from the old days. Here is a classic reprinted from the November, 1939 AMAZING STORIES. Whether it's a first or second reading for you, you'll enjoy this unique solution to the eternal triangle.

THREE people were looking through a quartz window.

The girl was squashed uncomfortably between the two men, but at the moment neither she nor they cared. The object they were watching was too interesting.

The girl was Joan Leeton. Her hair was an indeterminate brown, and owed its curls to tongs, not to nature. Her eyes were certainly brown, and bright with unquenchable good humor. In repose her face was undistinguished, though far from plain; when she smiled, it was beautiful.

Her greatest attraction (and it was part of her attraction that she did not realize it) lay in her character. She was soothingly sympathetic without becoming mushy, she was very level-

headed (a rare thing in a woman) and completely unselfish. She refused to lose her temper over anything, or take offense, or enlarge upon the truth in her favor, and yet she was tolerant of such lapses in others. She possessed a brain that was unusually able in its dealings with science, and yet her tastes and pleasures were simple.

William Fredericks (called "Will") had much in common with Joan, his sympathy was a little more disinterested, his humor less spontaneous, and he had certain prejudices. His tastes were reserved for what he considered the more worthy things. But he was calm and good-tempered, and his steadiness of purpose was reassuring. He was black-haired, with an expression of quiet content.

William Josephs (called "Bill") was different. He was completely unstable. Fiery of hair, he was alternately fiery and depressed of spirit. Impulsive, generous, highly emotional about art and music, he was given to periods of gaiety and moods of black melancholia. He reached, at his best, heights of mental brilliance far beyond the other two, but long bouts of lethargy prevented him from making the best of them.

Nevertheless, his sense of humor was keen, and he was often amused at his own absurdly over-sensitive character; but he could not change it.

Both these men were deeply in love with Joan, and both tried hard to conceal it. If Joan had any preference, she concealed it just as ably although they were aware that she was fond of both of them.

The quartz window, through which the three were looking, was set in a tall metal container, and just a few feet away was another container, identical even to the thickness of the windowglass.

Overhead was a complex assemblage of apparatus: bulbous, silvered tubes, small electric motors that hummed in various unexpected places, makeshift screens of zinc,

roughly soldered, coils upon coils of wire, and a network of slung cables that made the place look like a creeper-tangled tropical jungle. A large dynamo churned out a steady roar in the corner, and a pair of wide spark-gaps crackled continuously, filling the laboratory with a weird, jumping blue light as the day waned outside the windows and the dusk crept in.

An intruder in the laboratory might have looked through the window of the other container and seen, standing on a steel frame in a cubical chamber, an oil painting of "Madame Croignette" by Boucher, delicately illuminated by concealed lights. He would not have known it, but the painting was standing in a vacuum.

If he had squeezed behind the trio at the other container and gazed through their window he would have seen an apparently identical sight: an oil painting of "Madame Croignette" by Boucher, standing on a steel frame in a vacuum, delicately illuminated by concealed lights.

From which he would probably not gather much.

The catch was that the painting at which the three were gazing so intently was not quite the same as the one

in the first container—not yet. There were minute differences in color and proportion.

But gradually these differences were righting themselves, for the whole of the second canvas was being built up atom by atom, molecule by molecule, into an exactly identical twin of the one which had felt the brush of Francois Boucher.

The marvelously intricate apparatus, using an adaption of a newly discovered magnetic principle, consumed only a moderate amount of power in arranging the lines of sympathetic fields of force which brought every proton into position and every electron into its respective balancing orbit. It was a machine which could divert the flow of great forces without the ability to tap their energy.

“Any minute now!” breathed Will.

Bill rubbed his breath off the glass impatiently.

“Don’t do that!” he said, and promptly fogged the glass over again. Not ungently, he attempted to rub a clear patch with Joan’s own pretty nose. She exploded into laughter, fogging the glass hopelessly, and in the temporary confusion of this they missed seeing the event they had been waiting days for—the com-

pletion of the duplicate painting to the ultimate atom.

The spark-gaps died with a final snap, a lamp sprang into being on the indicator panel, and the dynamo began to run whirringly down to a stop.

They cleaned the window, and there stood “Madame Croignette” looking rather blankly out at them with wide brown eyes that exactly matched the sepia from Boucher’s palette, and both beauty spots and every hair of her powdered wig in place to a millionth of a millimetre. It was identical.

Will turned a valve, and there was the hiss of air rushing into the chamber. He opened the window, and lifted the painting out gingerly, as if he half-expected it to crumble in his hands.

“Perfect—a beauty!” he murmured. He looked up at Joan with shining eyes. Bill caught that look, and unaccountably checked the impulsive whoop of joy he was on the point of letting loose. He coughed instead, and leaned over Joan’s shoulder to inspect “Madame Croignette” more closely.

“The gamble’s come off,” went on Will. We’ve sunk every cent into this, but it won’t be long before we have

enough money to do anything we want to do—anything.”

“Anything—except to get Bill out of bed on Sunday mornings,” smiled Joan, and they laughed.

“No sensible millionaire would get out of bed any morning,” said Bill.

The steel and glass factory of Art Replicas, Limited, shone like a diamond up in the green hills of Surrey. In a financial sense, it had actually sprung from a diamond—the sale of a replica of the Koh-i-noor. That had been the one and only product of Precious Stones, Limited, an earlier company which was closed down by the government when they saw that it would destroy the world’s diamond market.

A sister company, Radium Products, was going strong up in the north because its scientific necessity was recognized. But the hearts of the three company directors lay in Art Replicas, and there they spent their time.

Famous works of art from all over the world passed through the factory’s portals, and gave birth to innumerable replicas of themselves for distribution and sale at quite reasonable prices.

Families of only moderate

means found it pleasing to have a Constable or Turner in the dining room and a Rodin statuette in the hall. And this widely flung ownership of *objets d’art*, which were to all intents and purposes the genuine articles, strengthened interest in art enormously. When people had lived with these things for a little while, they began to perceive the beauty in them—for real beauty is not always obvious at a glance—and to become greedy for more knowledge of them and the men who originally conceived and shaped them.

So the three directors, Will, Bill, and Joan, put all their energy into satisfying the demands of the world for art, and conscious of their part in furthering civilization, were deeply content.

For a time.

Then Bill, the impatient and easily-bored, broke out one day in the middle of a Directors’ Meeting.

“Oh, to hell with the Ming estimates!” he cried, sweeping a pile of orders from the table.

Joan and Will, recognizing the symptoms, exchanged wry glances of amusement.

“Look here,” went on Bill, “I don’t know what you two think, but I’m fed up! We’ve

become nothing but dull business people now. It isn't our sort of life. Repetition, repetition! I'm going crazy! We're *research* workers, not darned piece-workers. For heaven's sake, let's start out in some new line."

This little storm relieved him, and almost immediately he smiled too.

"But, really, aren't we?" he appealed.

"Yes," responded Joan and Will in duet.

Well, what about it?"

Will coughed, and prepared himself.

"Joan and I were talking about that this morning, as a matter of fact," he said. "We were going to suggest that we sell the factory, and retire to our old laboratory and re-equip it."

Bill picked up the ink-pot and emptied it solemnly over the Ming estimates. The ink made a shining lake in the center of the antique and valuable table.

"At last we're sane again," he said. "Now you know the line of investigation I want to open up. I'm perfectly convinced that the reason for our failure to create a living duplicate of any living creature was because the quottety we assumed for the *xy* action—"

"Just a moment, Bill," in-

terrupted Will. "Before we get on with that work, I—I mean, one of the reasons Joan and I wanted to retire was because—well—"

"What he's trying to say," said Joan quietly, "is that we plan to get married and settle down for a bit before we resume research work."

Bill stared at them. He was aware that his cheeks were slowly reddening. He felt numb.

"Well!" he said. "Well!" (He could think of nothing else. This was unbelievable! He must postpone consideration of it until he was alone, else his utter mortification would show.)

He put out his hand automatically, and they both clasped it.

"You know I wish you every possible happiness," he said, rather huskily. His mind seemed empty. He tried to form some comment, but somehow he could not compose one sentence that made sense.

"I think we'll get on all right," said Will, smiling at Joan. She smiled back at him, and unknowingly cut Bill to the heart.

With an effort, Bill pulled himself together and rang for wine to celebrate. He ordered some of the modern recon-

struction of an exceedingly rare '94. He tried to be as merry as possible during their party.

The night was moonless and cloudless, and the myriads of glittering pale blue points of the Milky Way sprawled across the sky as if someone had cast a handful of brilliants upon a black velvet cloth. But they twinkled steadily, for strong air currents were in motion in the upper atmosphere.

The Surrey lane was dark and silent. The only signs of life were the occasional distant glares of automobile headlights passing on the main highway nearly a mile away, and the red dot of a burning cigarette in a gap between the hedgerows.

The cigarette was Bill's. He sat there on a gate staring up at the array in the heavens and wondering what to do with his life.

He felt completely at sea, purposeless, and unutterably depressed. He had thought the word "heartache" was just a vague descriptive term. Now he knew what it meant. It was a solid physical feeling, an ache that tore him inside, unceasingly. He yearned to see Joan, to be with Joan, with his whole being. This longing would not let him rest. He

could have cried out for a respite.

He tried to argue himself to a more rational viewpoint.

"I am a man of science," he told himself. "Why should I allow old Mother Nature to torture and badger me like this? I can see through all the tricks of that old twister. These feelings are purely chemical reactions, the secretion of the glands mixing with the blood-stream. My mind is surely strong enough to conquer that? Else I have a third-rate brain, not the scientific instrument I've prided myself on."

He stared up at the stars glittering in their seeming calm stability, age-old and unchanging. But were they? They may look just the same when all mankind and its loves and hates had departed from this planet, and left it frozen and dark. But he knew that even as he watched, they were changing position at a frightful speed, receding from him at thousands of miles a second.

"Nature is a twister, full of illusions," he repeated . . .

There started a train of thought, a merciful anesthetic in which he lost himself for some minutes.

Somewhere down in the depths of his subconscious an idea which had, unknown to

him, been evolving itself for weeks, was stirred, and emerged suddenly into the light. He started, dropped his cigarette, and left it on the ground.

He sat there stiffly on the gate and considered the idea.

It was wild — incredibly wild. But if he worked hard and long at it, there was a chance that it might come off. It would provide a reason for living, anyway, so long as there was any hope at all of success.

He jumped down from the gate and started walking quickly and excitedly along the lane back to the factory. His mind was already turning over possibilities, planning eagerly. In the promise of this new adventure, the heartache was temporarily submerged.

Six months passed.

Bill had retired to the old laboratory, and spent much of that time enlarging and re-equipping it. He added a rabbit pen, turned an adjacent patch of ground into burial-ground to dispose of those who died under his knife. This cemetery was like no cemetery in the world, for it was also full of dead things that had never died—because they had never lived.

His research got nowhere.

He could build up, atom by atom, the exact physical counterpart of any living animal, but all such duplicates remained obstinately inanimate. They assumed an extraordinary life-like appearance, but it was frozen life. They were no more alive than waxwork images, even though they were as soft and pliable as the original animals in sleep.

Bill thought he had hit upon the trouble in a certain equation, but rechecking confirmed that the equation had been right in the first place. There was no flaw in either theory or practice as far as he could see.

Yet somehow he could not duplicate the force of life in action. Must he apply that force himself? How?

He applied various degrees of electrical impulses to the nerve-centers of the rabbits, tried rapid alternations of temperatures, miniature "iron lungs," vigorous massage—both external and internal—intra-venous and spinal injections of everything from adrenalin to even more powerful stimulants which his agile mind concocted. And still the artificial rabbits remained limp bundles of fur.

Joan and Will returned from their honeymoon and settled down in a roomy, comfortable old house a few miles away.

They sometimes dropped in to see how the research was going. Bill always seemed bright and cheerful enough when they came, and joked about his setbacks.

"I think I'll scour the world for the hottest thing in female bunnies and teach her to do a hula-hula on the lab bench," he said. "That ought to make some of these stiff sit up!"

Joan said she was seriously thinking of starting an eating-house specializing in rabbit pie, if Bill could keep up the supply of dead rabbits. He replied that he'd already buried enough to feed an army.

Their conversation was generally pitched in this bantering key, save when they really got down to technicalities. But when they had gone, Bill would sit and brood, thinking constantly of Joan. And he could concentrate on nothing else for the rest of that day.

Finally, more or less by accident, he found the press-button which awoke life in the rabbits. He was experimenting with a blood solution he had prepared, thinking it might remain more constant than the natural rabbits' blood, which became thin and useless too quickly. He had constructed a little pump to force the natural blood from a rabbit's veins and fill them

instead with his artificial solution.

The pump had not been going for more than a few seconds before the rabbit stirred weakly and opened its eyes. It twitched its nose, and lay quite still for a moment, save for one foot which continued to quiver.

Then suddenly it roused up and made a prodigious bound from the bench. The thin rubber tubes which tethered it by the neck parted in mid-air, and it fell awkwardly with a heavy thump on the floor. The blood continued to run from one of the broken tubes, but the pump which forced it out was the rabbit's own heart—beating at last.

The animal seemed to have used all its energy in that one powerful jump, and lay still on the floor and quietly expired.

Bill stood regarding it, his fingers still on the wheel of the pump.*

Then when he realized what it meant, he recaptured some of his old exuberance, and danced around the laboratory carrying a carboy of acid as though it were a Grecian urn.

Further experiments convinced him that he had set

*The only practical way of setting a stagnant circulation in motion. Pump the blood until the heart-pump works in sympathy.—Author.

foot within the portals of Nature's most carefully guarded citadel. Admittedly he could not himself create anything original or unique in life. But he could create a living image of any living creature under the sun.

A hot summer afternoon, a cool green lawn shaded by elms and on it two white-clad figures, Joan and Will putting through their miniature nine-hole course. A bright-striped awning by the hedge, and below it, two comfortable canvas chairs and a little Moorish table with soft drinks. An ivy-covered wall of an old red-brick mansion showing between the trees. The indefinable smell of new-cut grass in the air. The gentle but triumphant laughter of Joan as Will fozzled his shot.

That was the atmosphere Bill entered at the end of his duty tramp along the lane from the laboratory—it was his first outdoor excursion for weeks—and he could not help comparing it with the sort of world he had been living in: the benches and bottles and sinks, the eye-tiring field of microscope, the sheets of calculations under the glare of electric light in the dark hours of the night, the smell of blood and chemicals and rabbits.

And he realized completely that science itself wasn't the greatest thing in life. Personal happiness was. That was the goal of all men, whatever way they strove to reach it.

Joan caught sight of him standing on the edge of the lawn, and came hurrying across to greet him.

"Where have you been all this time?" she asked. "We've been dying to hear how you've been getting on."

"I've done it," said Bill.

"Done it? Have you really?" Her voice mounted excitedly almost to a squeak. She grabbed him by the wrist and hauled him across to Will. "He's done it!" she announced, and stood between them, watching both their faces eagerly.

Will took the news with his usual calmness, and smilingly gripped Bill's hand.

"Congratulations, old lad," he said. "Come and have a drink and tell us all about it."

They squatted on the grass and helped themselves from the table. Will could see that Bill had been overworking himself badly. His face was drawn and tired, his eyelids red, and he was in the grip of a nervous tension which for the time held him dumb and uncertain of himself.

Joan noticed this, too, and

checked the questions she was going to bombard upon him. Instead, she quietly withdrew to the house to prepare a pot of China tea which she knew always soothed Bill's migraine.

When she had gone, Bill, with an effort, shook some of the stupor from him, and looked across at Will. His gaze dropped, and he began to pluck idly at the grass.

"Will," he began, presently, "I—" He cleared his throat nervously, and started again in a none too steady voice. "Listen, Will, I have something a bit difficult to say, and I'm not so good at expressing myself. In the first place, I have always been crazily in love with Joan."

Will sat up, and looked at him curiously. But he let Bill go on.

"I never said anything because—well, because I was afraid I wouldn't make a success of marriage. Too unstable to settle down quietly with a decent girl like Joan. But I found I couldn't go on without her, and was going to propose—when you beat me to it. I've felt pretty miserable since, though this work has taken something of the edge off."

Will regarded the other's pale face—and wondered.

"This work held out a real hope to me. And now I've accomplished the major part of it. I can make a living copy of any living creature. Now—do you see *why* I threw myself into this research? *I want to create a living, breathing twin of Joan, and marry her!*"

Will started slightly. Bill got up and paced restlessly up and down.

"I know I'm asking a hell of a lot. This affair reaches deeper than scientific curiosity. No feeling man can contemplate such a proposal without misgivings, for his wife and for himself. But honestly, Will, I cannot see any possible harm arising from it. Though, admittedly, the only good would be to make a selfish man happy. For heaven's sake, let me know what you think."

Will sat contemplating, while the distracted Bill continued to pace.

Presently, he said: "You are sure no physical harm could come to Joan in the course of the experiment?"

"Certain — completely certain," said Bill.

"Then I personally have no objection. Anything but objection. I had no idea you felt that way, Bill, and it would make me, as well as Joan, very

unhappy to know you had to go on like that."

He caught sight of his wife approaching with a laden tray.

"Naturally, the decision rests with her," he said. "If she'd rather not, there's no more to it."

"No, of course not," agreed Bill.

But they both knew what her answer would be.

"Stop the car for a minute, Will," said Joan suddenly, and her husband stepped on the foot-brake.

The car halted in the lane on the brow of the hill. Through a gap in the hedge the two occupants had a view of Bill's laboratory as it lay below in the cradle of the valley.

Joan pointed down. In the field behind the "cemetery" two figures were strolling. Even at this distance, Bill's flaming hair marked his identity. His companion was a woman in a white summer frock. And it was on her that Joan's attention was fixed.

"She's alive now!" she whispered, and her voice trembled slightly.

Will nodded. He noticed her apprehension, and gripped her hand encouragingly. She managed a wry smile.

"It's not every day one goes to pay a visit to oneself," she

said. "It was unnerving enough last week to see her lying on the other couch in the lab, dressed in my red frock—which I was wearing—so pale, and— Oh, it was like seeing myself dead!"

"She's not dead now, and Bill's bought her some different clothes, so cheer up," said Will. "I know it's a most queer situation, but the only possible way to look at it is from the scientific viewpoint. It's a unique scientific event. And it's made Bill happy into the bargain."

He ruminated a minute.

"Wish he'd given us a hint as to how he works his resuscitation process, though," he went on. "Still, I suppose he's right to keep it secret. It's a discovery which could be appallingly abused. Think of dictators manufacturing loyal, stupid armies from one loyal, stupid soldier! Or industrialists manufacturing cheap labor! We should soon have a world of robots, all traces of individuality wiped out. No variety, nothing unique—life would not be worth living."

"No," replied Joan, mechanically, her thoughts still on that white-clad figure down there.

Will released the brake, and the car rolled down the hill toward the laboratory. The

two in the field saw it coming, and walked back through the cemetery to meet it. They reached the road as the car drew up.

"Hello, there!" greeted Bill. "You're late—we've had the kettle on the boil for half an hour. Doll* and I were getting anxious."

He advanced into the road, and the woman in the white frock lingered hesitantly behind him. Joan tightened her lips and braced herself to face this unusual ordeal. She got out of the car, and while Will and Bill were grasping hands, she walked to meet her now living twin.

Apparently Doll had decided to face it in the same way, and they met with oddly identical expressions of smiling surface ease, with an undercurrent of curiosity and doubt. They both saw and understood each other's expression simultaneously, and bust out laughing. That helped a lot.

"It's not so bad, after all," said Doll, and Joan checked herself from making the same instinctive remark.

"No, not nearly," she agreed.

And it wasn't. For although

Doll looked familiar to her, she could not seem to identify her with herself to any unusual extent. It was not that her apparel and hair-style were different, but that somehow her face, figure, and voice seemed like those of another person.

She did not realize that hitherto she had only seen parts of herself in certain mirrors from certain angles, and the complete effect was something she had simply never witnessed.** Nor that she had not heard her own voice outside her own head, so to speak—never from a distance of some feet.

Nevertheless, throughout the meal she felt vaguely uneasy, though she tried to hide it, and kept up a fire of witty remarks. And her other self, too, smiled at her across the table and talked easily.

They compared themselves in detail, and found they were completely identical in every way, even to the tiny mole on their left forearm. Their tastes too, agreed. They took the same amount of sugar in their tea, and liked and disliked the same foodstuffs.

"I've got my eye on that

*"Doll" was the name he had chosen for Joan II, as he had told them on the 'phone in the morning when he had invited them to come to tea and meet her.—Author.

**Joan discovered what many film stars discover when first seeing and hearing themselves on the screen: that one's own self appears almost as a stranger at the first detached view.—Author.

pink iced cake," laughed Doll. "Have you?"

Joan admitted it. So they shared it.

"You'll never have any trouble over buying each other birthday or Christmas presents," commented Will. "How nice to know exactly what the other wants!"

Bill had a permanent grin on his face, and beamed all over the table all the time. For once he did not have a great deal to say. He seemed too happy for words, and kept losing the thread of the conversation to gaze upon Doll fondly.

"We're going to be married tomorrow!" he announced unexpectedly, and they protested their surprise at the lack of warning. But they promised to be there.

There followed an evening of various sorts of games, and the similar thought-processes of Joan and Doll led to much amusement, especially in the guessing games. And twice they played checkers and twice they drew.

It was a merry evening, and Bill was merriest of all. Yet when they came to say good-night, Joan felt the return of the old uneasiness. As they left in the car, Joan caught a glimpse of Doll's face as she stood beside Bill at the gate.

And she divined that under that air of gayety, Doll suffered the same uneasiness as she.

Doll and Bill were married in a distant registry office next day, using a fictitious name and birthplace for Doll to avoid any publicity—after all, no one would question her identity.

Winter came and went.

Doll and Bill seemed to have settled down quite happily, and the quartette remained as close friends as ever. Both Doll and Joan were smitten with the urge to take up flying as a hobby, and joined the local flying club. They each bought a single-seater, and went for long flights, cruising side by side.

Almost in self-protection from this neglect (they had no interest in flying) Bill and Will began to work again together, delving further into the mysteries of the atom. This time they were searching for the yet-to-be-discovered secret of tapping the potential energy which the atom held.

And almost at once they stumbled on a new lead.

Formerly they had been able to divert atomic energy without being able to transform it into useful power. It was as if they had constructed a num-

ber of artificial dams at various points in a turbulent river, which altered the course of the river without tapping any of its force—though that is a poor and misleading analogy.

But now they had conceived, and were building, an amazingly complex machine which, in the same unsatisfactory analogy, could be likened to a turbine-generator, tapping some of the power of that turbulent river.

The "river" however, was very turbulent indeed, and needed skill and courage to harness. And there was a danger of the harness suddenly slipping.

Presently, the others became aware that Doll's health was gradually failing. She tried hard to keep up her usual air of brightness and cheerfulness, but she could not sleep, and became restless and nervous.

And Joan, who was her almost constant companion, suddenly realized what was worrying that mind which was so similar to hers. The realization was a genuine shock, which left her trembling, but she faced it.

"I think it would be a good thing for Doll and Bill to come and live here for a while, until

Doll's better," she said rather diffidently to Will one day.

"Yes, okay, if you think you can persuade them," replied Will. He looked a little puzzled.

"We have far too many empty rooms here," she said defensively. "Anyway I can help Doll if I'm with her more."

Doll seemed quite eager to come though a little dubious, but Bill thought it a great idea. They moved within the week.

At first, things did improve. Doll began to recover, and became more like her natural self. She was much less highly strung, and joined in the evening games with the other three with gusto. She studied Will's favorite game, backgammon, and began to enjoy beating him thoroughly and regularly.

And then Joan began to fail.

She became nervous, melancholy, and even morose. It seemed as though through helping Doll back to health, she had been infected with the same complaint.

Will was worried, and insisted on her being examined by a doctor.

The doctor told Will in private. "There's nothing physically wrong. She's nursing some secret worry, and she'll get worse until this worry is

eased. Persuade her to tell you what it is—she refuses to tell me.”

She also refused to tell Will, despite his pleadings.

And now Doll, who knew what the secret was, began to worry about Joan, and presently she relapsed into her previous nervous condition.

So it continued for a week, a miserable week for the two harassed and perplexed husbands, who did not know which way to turn. The following week, however, both women seemed to make an effort, and brightened up somewhat, and could even laugh at times.

The recovery continued, and Bill and Will deemed it safe to return to their daily work in the lab, completing the atom-harnessing machine.

One day Will happened to return to the house unexpectedly, and found the two women in each other's arms on a couch, crying their eyes out. He stood staring for a moment. They suddenly became aware of him, and parted, drying their eyes.

“What's up, Will? Why have you come back?” asked Joan, unsteadily, sniffing.

“Er—to get my slide-rule; I'd forgotten it,” he said. “Bill wanted to trust his memory, but I think there's some-

thing wrong with his figures. I want to check up before we test the machine further. But—what's the matter with you two?”

“Oh, we're all right,” said Doll, strainedly and not very convincingly. She blew her nose, and endeavored to pull herself together. But almost immediately she was overtaken by another burst of weeping, and Joan put her arms around her comfortingly.

“Look here,” said Will, in a sudden and unusual exasperation, “I've had about enough of this. You know that Bill and I are only too willing to deal with whatever you're worrying about. Yet the pair of you won't say a word—only cry and fret. How can we help if you won't tell us? Do you think we like to see you going on like this?”

“I'll tell you, Will,” said Joan, quietly.

Doll emitted a muffled “No!” but Joan ignored her, and went on: “Don't you see that Bill has created another me in *every* detail? Every memory and every feeling? And because Doll thinks and feels exactly as I do, she's in love with you! She has been that way from the very beginning. All this time she's been trying to conquer it, to

suppress it, and make Bill happy instead."

Doll's shoulders shook with the intensity of her sobbing. Will laid his hands gently on them, consolingly. He could think of nothing whatever to say. He had not even dreamt of such a situation, obvious as it appeared now.

"Do you wonder the conflict got her down?" said Joan. "Poor girl! I brought her here to be nearer to you, and that eased things for her."

"But it didn't for you," said Will, quietly, looking straight at her. "I see now why you began to worry. Why didn't you tell me then, Joan?"

"How could I?"

He bit his lip, paced nervously over to the window, and stood with his back to the pair on the couch.

"What a position!" he thought. "What can we do? Poor Bill!"

He wondered how he could break the sorry news to his best friend, and even as he wondered, the problem was solved for him.

From the window there was a view down the length of the wide, shallow valley, and a couple of miles away the white concrete laboratory could just be seen nestling at the foot of one of the farther slopes.

There were fields all around it, and a long row of great sturdy oak trees started from its northern corner.

From this height and distance the whole place looked like a table-top model. Will stared moodily at that little white box where Bill was, and tried to clarify his chaotic thoughts.

And suddenly, incredibly, before his eyes the distant white box spurted up in a dusty cloud of chalk-powder, and ere a particle of it had neared its topmost height, the whole of that part of the valley was split across by a curtain of searing, glaring flame. The whole string of oak trees, tough and amazingly deep-rooted though they were, floated up through the air like feathers of windblown thistle-down before the blast of that mighty eruption.

The glaring flame vanished suddenly, like a light that had been turned out and left a thick, brown, heaving fog in its place, a cloud of earth that had been pulverized. Will caught a glimpse of the torn oak trees falling back into this brown, rolling cloud, and then the blast wave, which had traveled up the valley, smote the house.

The window was instantly shattered and blown in, and

he went flying backwards in a shower of glass fragments. He hit the floor awkwardly and sprawled there, and only then did his laggard brain realize what had happened.

Bill's habitual impatience had at last been his undoing. He had refused to wait any longer for Will's return, and gone on with the test, trusting to his memory. And he had been wrong.

The harness had slipped.

A man sat on a hill with a wide and lovely view of the country, bright in summer sunshine, spread before him. The rich green squares of the fields, the white ribbons of the lanes, the yellow blocks of haystacks and gray spires of village churches, made up a pattern infinitely pleasing to the eye.

And the bees hummed drowsily, nearby sheep and cattle made the noises of their kind, and a neighboring thicket fairly rang with the unending chorus of a hundred birds.

But all this might as well have been set on another planet, for the man could neither see nor hear the happy environment. He was in hell.

It was a fortnight now since Bill had gone. When that grief had begun to wear off, it was succeeded by the most per-

plexing and unique problem that had ever beset a member of the human race.

Will had been left to live with two women who loved him equally violently. Neither could ever conquer or suppress that love, whatever they did. They knew that.

On the other hand, Will was a person who was only capable of loving one of the women. Monogamy is deeprooted in most normal people, and particularly so with Will. He had looked forward to traveling through life with one constant companion, and only one—Joan.

But now there were two Joans, identical in appearance, feeling, thought. Nevertheless, they were two separate people. And in between them he was a torn and anguished man, with his domestic life in shapeless ruins.

He could not ease his mental torture with work, for since Bill died so tragically, he could not settle down to anything in a laboratory.

It was no easier for Joan and Doll. Probably harder. To have one's own self as a rival—even a friendly, understanding rival—for a man's companionship and affection was almost unbearable.

This afternoon they had both gone to a flying club, to

attempt to escape for awhile the burden of worry, apparently. Though neither was in a fit condition to fly, for they were tottering on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

The club was near the hill where Will was sitting and striving to find some working solution to a unique human problem which seemed quite insoluble. So it was no coincidence that presently a humming in the sky caused him to lift dull eyes to see both the familiar monoplanes circling and curving across the blue spaces between the creamy, cumulus clouds.

He lay back on the grass watching them. He wondered which plane was which, but there was no means of telling, for they were similar models. And anyway, that would not tell him which was Joan and which was Doll, for they quite often used each other's planes, to keep the "feel" of both. He wondered what they were thinking up there . . .

One of the planes straightened and flew away to the west, climbing as it went. Its rising drone became fainter. The other plane continued to bank and curve above.

Presently, Will closed his eyes and tried to doze in the warm sunlight. It was no use.

In the darkness of his mind revolved the same old maddening images, doubts, and questions. It was as if he had become entangled in a nightmare from which he could not awake.

The engine of the plane overhead suddenly stopped. He opened his eyes, but could not locate it for a moment.

Then he saw it against the sun, and it was falling swiftly in a tailspin. It fell out of the direct glare of the sun, and he saw it in detail, revolving as it plunged so that the wings glinted like a flashing heliograph. He realized with a shock that it was but a few hundred feet from the ground.

He scrambled to his feet, in an awful agitation.

"Joan!" he cried, hoarsely. "Joan!"

The machine continued its fall steadily and inevitably, spun down past his eye-level, and fell into the center of one of the green squares of the fields below.

He started running down the hill even as it landed. As the sound of the crash reached him, he saw a rose of fire blossom like magic in that green square, and from it a wavering growth of black, oily smoke mounted into the heavens. The tears started from his eyes, and ran freely.

When he reached the scene, the inferno was past its worst, and as the flames died he saw that nothing was left, only black, shapeless, scattered things, unrecognizable as once human or once machine.

There was a squeal of brakes from the road. An ambulance had arrived from the flying club. Two men jumped out, burst through the hedge. It did not take them more than a few seconds to realize that there was no hope.

"Quick, Mr. Fredericks, jump in," cried one of them, recognizing Will. "We must go straight to the other one."

The other one!

Before he could question them, Will was hustled between them into the driving cabin of the ambulance. The vehicle was quickly reversed, and sped off in the opposite direction.

"Did—did the other plane —" began Will, and the words stuck in his throat.

The driver, with his eye on the road which was scudding under their wheels at sixty miles an hour, nodded grimly.

"Didn't you see, sir? They both crashed at exactly the same time, in the same way—tailspin. A shocking accident—terrible. I can't think how to express my sympathy, sir.

I only pray that this one won't turn out so bad."

It was as if the ability to feel had left Will. His thoughts slowed up almost to a standstill. He sat there numbed. He dare not try to think.

But, sluggishly, his thoughts went on. Joan and Doll had crashed at exactly the same time in exactly the same way. That was above coincidence. They must have both been thinking along the same lines again, and that meant they had crashed *deliberately!* They planned it!

He saw now the whole irony of it, and groaned.

Joan and Doll had each tried to solve the problem in their own way, and each had reached the same conclusion without being aware what the other was thinking. They saw that one of them would have to step out of the picture if Will was ever to be happy. They knew that one would have to step completely out, for life could no longer be tolerated by her if she had to lose Will.

And, characteristically, they had each made up their minds to be the self-sacrificing one.

Doll felt that she was an intruder, wrecking the lives of a happily married pair. It was no fault of hers: she had not asked to be created full of

love for a man she could never have.

But she felt that she was leading an unnecessary existence, and every moment of it was hurting the man she loved. So she decided to relinquish the gift of life.

Joan's reasoning was that she had been partly responsible for bringing Doll into this world, unasked, and with exactly similar feelings and longings as herself. Ever since she had existed, those feelings had been ungratified, cruelly crushed and thwarted. It wasn't fair. Doll had as much right to happiness as she. Joan had enjoyed her period of happiness with Will. Now let Doll enjoy hers.

So it was that two planes, a mile apart, went spinning into crashes that were meant to appear accidental—and did, except to one man, the one who most of all was intended never to know the truth.

The driver was speaking again.

"It was a ghastly dilemma for us at the club. We saw 'em come down on opposite sides and both catch fire. We have only one fire engine, one ambulance. Had to send the engine to one, and rush this ambulance to the other. The engine couldn't have done any good

at this end, as it happens. Hope it was in time where we're going!"

Will's dulled mind seemed to take this in quite detachedly. Who had been killed in the crash he saw? Joan or Doll? Joan or Doll?

Then suddenly it burst upon him that it was only the original Joan that he loved. That was the person whom he had known so long, around whom his affection had centered. The hair he had caressed, the lips he had pressed, the gay brown eyes which had smiled into his. He had never touched Doll in that way.

Doll seemed but a shadow of all that. She may have had memories of those happenings, but she never actually experienced them. They were only artificial memories. Yet they must have seemed real enough to her.

The ambulance arrived at the scene of the second crash.

The plane had flattened out a few feet from the ground, and not landed so disastrously as the other. It lay crumpled athwart a burned and blackened hedge. The fire engine had quenched the flames within a few minutes. And the pilot had been dragged clear, unconscious, badly knocked about and burned.

They got her into the ambu-

lance, and rushed her to the hospital.

Will had been sitting by the bedside for three hours before the girl in the bed had opened her eyes.

Blank, brown eyes they were, which looked at him, then at the hospital ward, without the faintest change of expression.

"Joan!" he whispered, clasping her free arm—the other was in a splint. There was no response of any sort. She lay back gazing unseeingly at the ceiling. He licked his dry lips. It couldn't be Joan after all.

"Doll!" he tried. "Do you feel all right?"

Still no response.

"I know that expression," said the doctor, who was standing by. "She's lost her memory."

"For good, do you think?" asked Will, perturbed.

The doctor pursed his lips to indicate he didn't know.

"Good Lord! Is there no way of finding out whether she is my wife or my sister-in-law?"

"If you don't know, no one does, Mr. Fredericks," replied the doctor. "We can't tell anything from her clothes, for they were burned in the crash, and destroyed before we real-

ized their importance. We've often remarked their uncanny resemblance. Certainly you can tell them apart."

"I can't!" answered Will, in anguish. "There is no way."

The next day, the patient had largely recovered her senses, and was able to sit up and talk. But a whole tract of her memory had been obliterated. She remembered nothing of her twin, and in fact nothing at all of the events after the duplication experiment.

Lying on the couch in the laboratory, preparing herself under the direction of Bill, was the last scene she remembered.

The hospital psychologist said that the shock of the crash had caused her to unconsciously repress a part of her life which she did not want to remember. She could not remember now if she wanted to. He said he might discover the truth from her eventually, but if he did, it would take months—maybe even years.

But naturally her memories of Will, and their marriage, were intact, and she loved him as strongly as ever.

Was she Joan or Doll?

Will spent a sleepless night, turning the matter over. Did it really matter? There was only one left now—why not

assume she was Joan, and carry on? But he knew that as long as doubt and uncertainty existed, he would never be able to recover the old free life he had with Joan.

It seemed that he would have to surrender her to the psychologist, and that would bring to light all sorts of details which neither he, Joan, nor Bill had ever wished to be revealed.

But the next day something turned up which changed the face of things.

Searching the area of Bill's laboratory the police found the charred remains of personal letters, paid and receipted accounts and some experimental notebooks. They brought them to Will to interpret. With their consent he destroyed the personal papers.

In the most badly charred of the notebooks he found an account of Bill's attempt to infuse life into his replicas of living creatures.

The last pages were about the experiment of creating

another Joan, and the last recognizable entry read:

"This clumsy business of pumping through pipes, in the manner of a blood transfusion, left a small scar at the base of Doll's neck, the only flaw in an otherwise perfect copy of Joan. I resented..."

The rest was burned away. Will hurried to the hospital.

Wonderingly, the girl allowed him to examine her neck.

There was not the slightest sign of a scar anywhere on it.

"You are Joan," he said, and embraced her as satisfactorily as her injuries would permit.

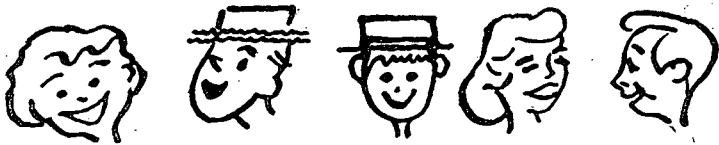
"I am Joan," she repeated, kissing and hugging him back.

And at last they knew again the blessedness of peace of mind.

For once, Fate, which had used them so hardly, showed mercy, and they never knew that in the packet of Bill's receipted accounts, which Will had destroyed, was one from a famous plastic surgeon, which began:

"For removing operation scar from neck, and two days' nursing and attention."

THE END



According to you...

Dear Editor:

I enjoyed the two stories in April *Fantastic* "The Captain of His Soul" and "The Obvious Solution." Their author Jack Sharkey did a fine job and I'll be following his work in the future.

Earl S. Ramseyer
4207 N. Walcott Ave.
Chicago 13, Ill.

Dear Editor:

I have just begun to collect issues of *Fantastic* and I think they're grand. Keep leaning toward the horror-supernatural type of tales like "The Arm of Enmord" and "The Hungry Eye." Also continue printing stories by Jack Sharkey. Finished reading "Queen of the Green Sun" and can only say one word for it . . . Fantastic!

Dallas Dowhower
438 East Penn Avenue
Cleona, Pennsylvania

• *More Sharkey coming up!*

Dear Editor:

In my spare time I am a very dedicated science fiction fan. I like to spend my leisure hours reading s-f books because I have always felt that there couldn't be a short story in s-f that was good.

Last week, for the first time, I came across the April, 1959 issue of *Fantastic*. I had heard that it was one of the best pocket-book magazines, so I purchased one. I glanced through it to see what kind of stories could be interesting and yet short. I have never enjoyed myself so much in one book before. Your choice of stories was A-1 with me. I enjoyed one of the

shorts so much that I have told it to everyone I meet: "A Touch of the Sun" by Arthur and Irwin Porges.

Ron Geer
67 North 1st West
Provo, Utah

• *From many of the comments we've heard, it looks like the Porges' story may become at least a minor classic.*

Dear Editor:

My letter is directed to Mr. Ed Doerr, with reference to his letter which appeared in the April *Fantastic*. To separate true science from religion is like trying to divorce H_2O and still have water.

The very essence of a scientist is Faith. Without it there could be no long years of unrewarding work nor optimism in the face of failures. It is only his faith in himself and in the truth which he believes is just around the corner which keeps him going.

Mr. Doerr uses the term "intuition" and "revelation" disdainfully. What term then, does he apply to the scientist's certainty that sooner or later he will find the answer he is seeking?

Galileo was scorned by his contemporaries. He rejected many of the so-called proven theories of his day. He believed differently—and he was right. What forced him to go on? What drove him to the truth? Genius? Foresight? Those before him certainly had both. What then is the answer if not a special inner knowledge, in short—"Intuition."

There were hundreds like him—Newton, Darwin, others. If all of these great men had gone along with Mr. Doerr's "true is that label which we may attach to statements or formulae whose workability or congruence with observed 'reality' has been empirically demonstrated to a satisfactory degree of statistical significance" where would science be today?

As with the separation of H_2O you have two gases which couldn't quench thirst or wash the kitchen sink, so would science be without Faith. The job at hand just wouldn't get done.

Since the essence of two great forces in the world, Science and Religion is Faith, how can one repress the other?

As the components of water always find themselves to create moisture even in the very air we breathe, so must science walk hand in hand with Faith intuition, revelation and God to carry out its goals.

Joan Maguire
5354 Akron St.
Philadelphia 24, Pa.

• *And Mr. Doerr replies . . .*

Dear Editor:

I would like to draw attention to the results of two major studies concerning the "religious beliefs" of scientists, both by eminent psychologists.

In *The Reformation of the Churches* (Beacon, 1950) psychologist James H. Leuba presents the results of his two-decade study of the religious beliefs of American scientists. His findings clearly show that only a small minority of our major scientists believe in either a personal deity or personal immortality, the keystone tenets of the traditional religious orthodoxies.

In the November, 1952, issue of *Scientific American*, Anne Roe, a clinical psychologist and wife of an eminent paleontologist, presented the findings of her study of the backgrounds and personalities of 64 of our country's leading scientists: "Only three of the 64 now have a serious interest in any church; only a few even maintain church memberships."

In view of these findings (and there are no others which contradict them) and the personal writings of many other scientists, such as Albert Einstein and Julian Huxley, it can only be concluded that most scientists feel that science and traditional religion are more or less incompatible or, at the very least, that the traditional orthodoxies are irrelevant to the needs of our time. This conclusion is objected to only by scientists who cannot outgrow orthodoxy, such as the perennial Jeans and Eddington, or by theologians who cannot stomach the fact that they have had their day.

The sooner that the public catches up with the Scientific Humanism of Julian Huxley and others, the sooner will the brighter utopias of the s-f writers be realized.

Ed Doerr
4022 Meadows Drive, Apt. E-1
Indianapolis, Indiana

ACCORDING TO YOU . . .

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• Yet is a belief in traditional religion the same thing as Miss Maguire's concept of "faith"? We don't think the two are necessarily synonymous.



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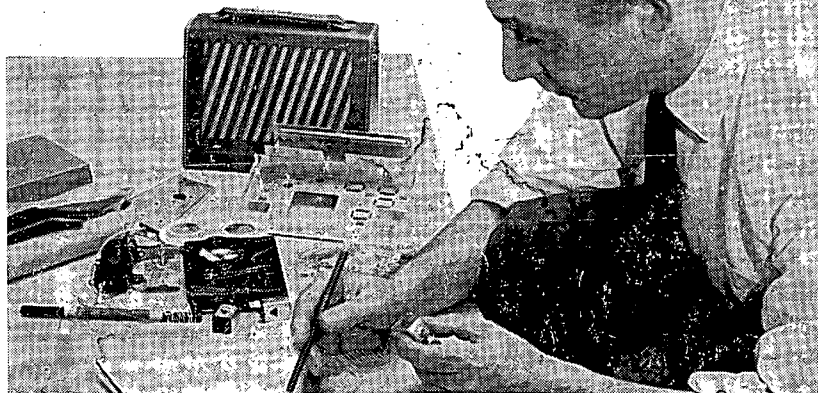
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